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Teacher Perceptions Of The Impact Of Federal And State Mandates On Their Students And Classrooms In Small, Rural, Isolated Communities

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TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF THE IMPACT OF FEDERAL AND STATE MANDATES
ON THEIR STUDENTS AND CLASSROOMS IN
SMALL, RURAL, ISOLATED COMMUNITIES

By

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A DISSERTATION

Presented to the Affiliated Faculty of

The College of Graduate and Professional Studies at the University of New England

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June 2016
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to gain perspectives of grade two through eight teachers on the impact of federal and state mandates, including the results of high-stakes standardized testing. The study focused on teacher perceptions of mandates and the effects on their students in three small, geographically isolated, public schools during the 2015-2016 school year. Nine teachers participated in one-on-one, in-depth interviews. This study focused on four themes of teacher perceptions: (a) pedagogy, relationships, location and alignment, (b) the general process of mandate implementation, (c) concerns about specific mandates, and (d) student understanding and emotional impacts of high-stakes testing. Teacher perceptions lead to four major findings: (a) teachers believe that relationships are critical in creating positive, caring, trusting learning environments and the unique locations of these schools fosters the development of these relationships, (b) implementation and the professional development needed to carry out mandates has a significant impact on teachers with leadership playing a significant role in the success or failure of implementation, (c) high-stakes testing does not increase student learning and creates a stressful environment, and (d) all students exhibit at least moderate to high levels of anxiety before, during, and after testing with the largest impact being on marginalized or at-risk students.

University of New England

Doctor of Education
Educational Leadership

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this study to all the teachers out there in the trenches who are doing their best to educate the young souls they are entrusted with; your work does not go unnoticed. Also to the students who are impacted by testing; never let a number define you. And finally, to my Mom; you are the strength that burns within me. “On the darkest of days, when I feel inadequate, unloved and unworthy, I remember whose daughter I am and I straighten my crown.” ~ unknown

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Federal mandates such as The No Child Left Behind Act (2002) have substantially increased the number of school-level mandates, including standardized, high-stakes testing (United States Department of Education, 2007) with the goal of improving student achievement and teacher performance. Testing proponents and policy makers alike claim that test-based accountability programs hold educators accountable and, thus, raise student achievement (Evers and Walberg, 2002; Raymond and Hanushek, 2003). Teachers are under an increasing amount of pressure to raise student test scores in order to meet Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) on high-stakes tests, as their careers could be in jeopardy if they do not show improvement (Glass, 2002). Jones and Egley (2007) report that, “Many educators, researchers, parents, students and national educational organizations are not convinced that testing programs are the best means to ensure that students are learning and that teachers are teaching effectively” (p. 232).

There is a growing body of research that tells us that testing pressure is passed on to students (Hembree, 1988; Hill and Wigfield, 1984). This is a reasonable speculation as there has been a steady increase in the prevalence of test anxiety among students over the last several decades. In the 1980s, researchers studying testing anxiety found that between 10% and 25% of the students in the US experienced test anxiety (e.g., Hill & Wigfield, 1984). Today, this number has increased with more than 33% of U.S. students reporting that they experience some form of test anxiety (Methia, 2004). Wasserburg (2009) states:

The increase in standardized testing will likely lead to an increase in test anxiety in elementary school children. When achievement scores are influenced by test anxiety, the scores will be biased. In this situation, issues about the validity of the score’s

interpretation will be raised. (p. 2)

Scores are biased as students do not perform to the best of their abilities when they are anxious. Strauss (2013) tells us, “Test anxiety is a psychological condition that involves severe distress before, during and/or after an exam, making it impossible for them to do their best” (para. 2)

As a teacher, I witness evidence of this pressure as students show signs of high levels of anxiety before, during, and after testing. Student anxiety causes me to question what and how I am teaching in order to best serve students if their fates are to be determined by standardized tests. An unbalanced focus on test practice, rather than more diverse pedagogies, has been one result. Despite exhaustive research and interventions, however, achievement has remained stagnant over the past 30 years (Leschly, 2003). Additionally, data collected by the United States Department of Health and Human Services reports an increase in mental health related issues for all ages, including elementary age students (National Center for Health Statistics, 2008).

This study explores teacher perceptions related to the results of high-stakes testing mandates including: loss of comprehensive curriculum, teacher evaluations based on student test scores, human resources to fulfill requirements of mandates and how these actions may impact students. Bracey (2000) states, “The problem with high-stakes tests is that they cause people to pay too much attention to increasing scores, to the detriment of a more comprehensive education” (p. 16). This study will also explore the potential to reach mandated goals of standardized testing by teachers and students and the effect this outcome has on the teacher/student relationship. This study will add the voices of teachers in small, isolated communities, along with their insight into student experiences, to the conversation about the toll of the pressures of state and federally mandated high-stakes testing, which has become prevalent in the North American public educational system.

Problem Statement

The North American educational landscape has seen a variety of changes over the past few decades due in large part to federal and state mandates, including high-stakes testing. Teachers who do not meet Annual Yearly Progress goals may lose employment or have other sanctions placed on them, even if the goals are not in alignment with the teacher's beliefs about teaching, learning, and best practice. As a result, "teaching to the test" has become a focus for teachers and students and has begun to shape curriculum and change teaching styles (Sheppard, 2002). In a 2007 survey of over 700 third- through sixth-grade teachers, most teachers reported that, "students spend a great deal of time practicing test-taking strategies, which takes away from learning and increasing content knowledge" (Jones & Egley, 2007, p. 238). Strauss (2014) quotes Maggiano as saying,

The obsession with standardized testing is driving teachers – fearful that their jobs will be at stake if test scores don't rise – to teach to the test. Most educators agree that teaching to the test is wrong, yet this has become standard operating procedure in most classrooms and rote memorization has become commonplace in most classrooms. (para. 6 & 7)

Test anxiety has become an increasingly significant concern as students express feelings of anxiety, nervousness, panic, and fear about their performance (Putwain, Connors, Woods, & Nicholson, 2012). Anxiety undermines how well a student may perform on any given test. These tests have created a stressful learning environment rather than a nurturing one, especially for younger children who may be more susceptible to long-term effects of stress. These effects include depression, low self-esteem, and higher dropout rates (Brown et al, 2004; Flores & Clark, 2003; Madaus & Russell, 2010; Paris, 2000). Given the importance of federally mandated

test scores in assessing the effectiveness of teaching and learning, it's important to explore the question of bias in scores due to test anxiety and the resulting negative effects they cause, that are important to document.

Thus far, research on test anxiety has primarily focused on the adult and older student population. Younger student perspectives in the literature are limited. Increased pressure, such as high-stakes testing, is likely to worsen and/or increase other anxieties and deepen depression for students moving up through the current system. Research on teachers' observations of the younger students' perspective is necessary to better understand how high-stakes testing is negatively affecting students' well-being. Understanding how teacher efficacy and pedagogy may influence students' testing perceptions also warrants further study.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to gain perspectives of teachers on the impact of federal and state mandates, including the results of high-stakes standardized testing. The study focused on second through eighth grade teachers and their students in multiple small, geographically isolated, public schools during the 2015-2016 school year.

Research Questions

The overarching essential research question for this study is: *How do federal and state mandated high-stakes tests impact teachers and students in grades two through eight in small, isolated public schools?* Creswell (2013) cites Moustakas (1994) that participants are asked two broad, general questions: "What have you experienced in terms of the phenomenon? What context or situations have typically influenced or affected your experiences of the phenomenon?" (p. 81). Therefore, the three over-arching questions include:

What is your perception of the impact of federal and state mandates on your students, classroom and beliefs as a teacher working in a small, isolated, public school community?

What has influenced your experiences and perceptions of the effects of federal and state mandates in your classroom and for your students? (including professional development, isolation, proximity to students/parents on behalf of students, etc.)

From your perspective, do students show signs of anxiety before, during, and/or after standardized testing?

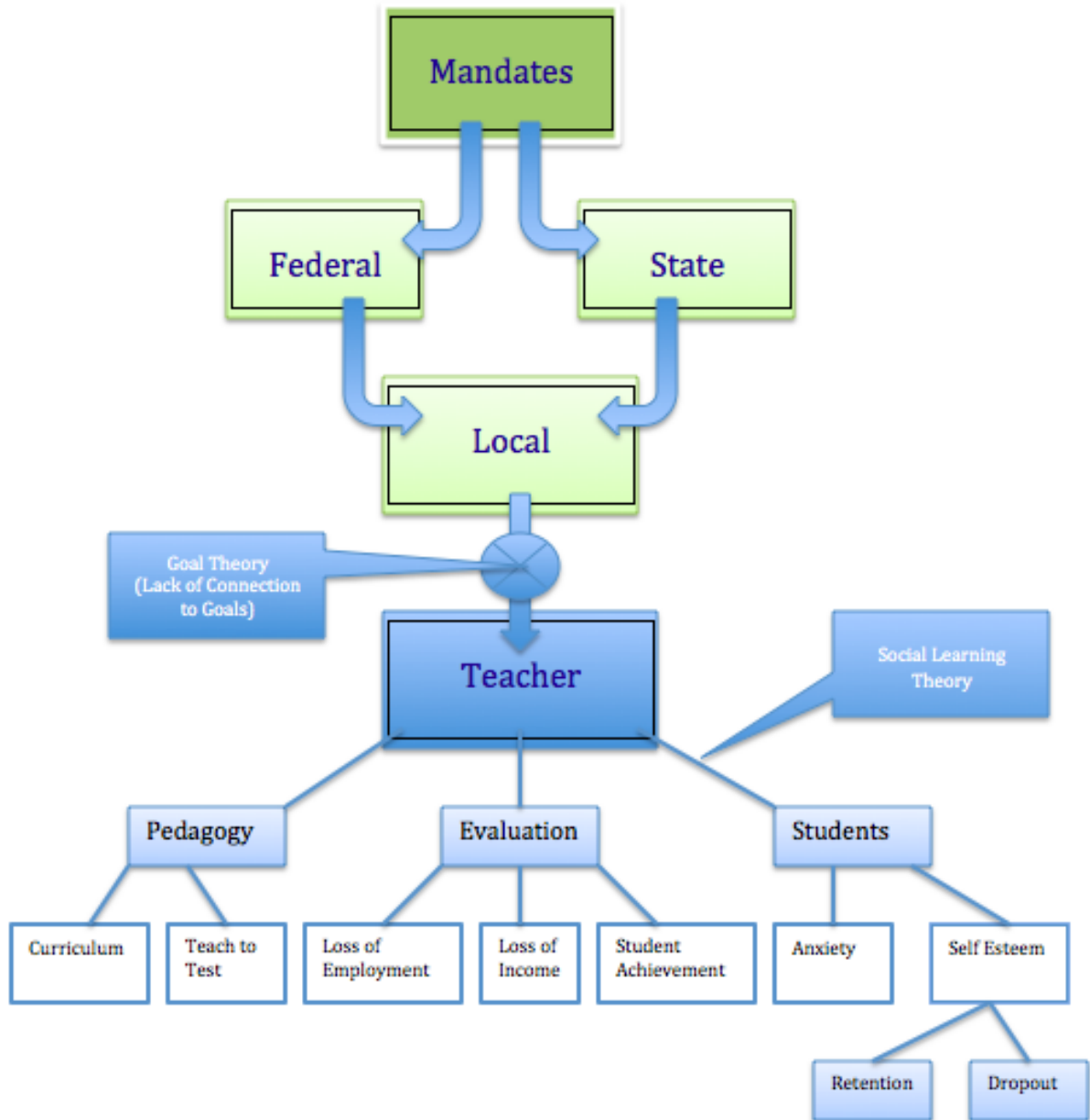
Conceptual Framework

This research study is grounded in Goal Theory, also referred to as Goal Attainment Theory. The inclusion of Cognitive Social Theory strengthens the relationship between teacher efficacy and pedagogy, as well as student attitude. Higgins, Shah and Freidman (1997) explain Goal Attainment as “the perceived value of an event is the extent to which it fulfills the perceiver’s goals” (p. 515). Positive outcomes produce good feelings, while negative outcomes produce bad feelings. Goal attainment can also produce emotional responses related to whether one’s perceived self is in line with one’s desired self. Test anxiety has become a progressively widespread issue over the past few decades (Lawson, 2007; Spielberger & Vagg, 1995). The extensive testing of young children increases the need to consider the effects of such testing on student behavior and emotional health, as well as test performance. “As students’ lives become more and more impacted by their test scores, it is critical that test anxiety and behavior changes in children be explored and documented” (Landry, 2005, p. 9). Giving students a voice in how they perceive testing and how it affects them is a critical consideration as we move forward with the implications of high-stakes testing.

Many educators believe that in order to help their students be successful they need to encourage creativity and risk taking by establishing a caring and nurturing environment. The North American educational landscape has seen a variety of mandates resulting in a plethora of high-stakes standardized testing, which may be undermining teachers' abilities to create caring learning communities. Amrein and Berliner (2002) state that, "many researchers, teachers and social critics contend that high-stakes testing policies have worsened the quality of our schools and have created negative effects that severely outweigh the few, if any, positive benefits associated with high-stakes testing policies" (p. 11). Research recognizes that a teacher's classroom practices are influenced by their beliefs and knowledge (Borko & Putnam, 1996). These beliefs and knowledge are a result of their experiences, both as student and teacher, and provide the lens through which they view their practices. Social Cognitive Theory emphasizes that much of what is learned is gained through observations in social settings. Eisenhardt, Besnoy & Steele (2012) state, "When you get to know the personalities and how a child learns and operates, it is then much easier to teach them academics. Knowing your students allows you to see through a window of their perspective and then teach them accordingly" (p. 5). In small, isolated settings, teachers have the ability to get to know their students' individual needs, interests, and learning styles. A student's relationship with his/her teacher may be one of the most powerful connections a child experiences during their education. When mandates place significant pressures on a teacher's ability to connect with students, the result may be higher teacher burnout rates (Yorulmaz, Altinkurt, & Yilmaz, 2015).

Table 1.1 Graphic Conceptual Framework

Conceptual Framework: Federal and State Mandates to Teacher Perspectives



Assumptions and Delimitations

This study assumes that teachers believe in best practices and attempt to make education relevant to students' immediate lives and that curriculum is fluid, dynamic, and tailored to reflect the interests of students (Dewey, 1938). Mandates have increased the number of tests given per school year, the levels at which tests are administered, and have created a high-stakes testing environment, thus limiting a teacher's ability to engage in best practices. The use of both teacher and student voice in standardized, high-stakes testing with younger students is limited in current research and is based mainly on adult perspective. Although this study is also based on adult perspectives, intimate relationships with students will be examined to add student voices to this body of research. Student advocacy is critical in creating an environment where students can effectively learn and adequately demonstrate learning in an environment that supports long-term development.

This study is being conducted in three small, isolated, public, and geographically unique schools with teachers who teach grades two through eight. The economic and social experiences vary only slightly from school to school. Student enrollment in these schools varies from 65 to 250 students. Although this study seeks to describe and understand the experiences and perspectives of these teachers and students, caution should be used in transferring conclusions of this study to other settings as this study focuses on a unique set of schools.

Significance

Current research related to teacher perceptions of federal and state mandates and the effects on teachers and students is based largely on quantitative studies including teachers and students in large public high school settings. This study focuses on the experiences and perceptions of teachers in small, isolated public schools with low teacher-to-student ratios. In

small school settings much of the burden of implementing mandates is the responsibility of the teachers themselves as staffing is limited. For example, one of the K-12 schools within the study has only 12 full-time teaching staff members and two administrators. Human resources are limited, as is access to professional development due to geographical challenges.

Geographical isolation also means that teachers know their students outside of the school setting and, therefore, have a better understanding of each student's individual interests, learning styles, and needs. A teacher's perception of a student and a student's confidence in the teacher are key to addressing various aspects of student learning (Tyler and Boelter, 2008). Standardized tests have been used to evaluate high school students since the SATs were first given in 1901. However, high-stakes testing has only been introduced at the elementary level in the past few decades. Perspectives of teachers in isolated settings will provide insight into the toll of the pressures of federal and state mandates and the effects on their students. Research in this area has thus far been limited.

Definition of Terms

Goal Theory – In goal theory, two dichotomous achievement goals have been identified: mastery and performance. Mastery goals have been identified as both task and learning oriented goals. Performance goals have been labeled as ego and ability goals. According to Pintrich (2000):

Achievement goals refer to the purposes or reasons an individual is pursuing an achievement task, most often operationalized in terms of academic learning tasks, although they can be applied to other achievement contexts such as athletic or business settings ...achievement goal constructs represent an integrated and organized pattern of beliefs about, not just the general purposes or reasons for achievement, but also the

standards or criteria (the “target”) that will be used to judge successful performance. (p. 93)

High-Stakes Testing – High-stakes tests are those that are used to make important decisions for students (such as placement, retention, graduation, and college admission), teachers (such as probation, bonuses, and employment) and schools (funding and student enrollment). High-stakes tests are commonly used for the purpose of accountability to ensure that students are making adequate progress and are being taught by effective teachers.

Marginalized Students – Marginalization is defined as a process by which individuals or specific groups of people, dealing with specific circumstances are relegated to the lower or outer edges of society. Miller (2006) identifies marginalized students as, “the teenage mother, the unmotivated genius, the poor test taker, the creative dyslexic, the family wage earner, the homeless student, and so forth in endless diversity” (p. 50). These students typically need additional educational supports and are at higher risk of drop out.

Self-Efficacy – Self-efficacy is the belief in one’s own ability to accomplish a set goal. The theory of self-efficacy informs us that people will generally attempt a goal only if they believe they can accomplish it, and will avoid a goal if they believe they will fail. Self-efficacy is a construct of Social Cognitive Theory. People with a strong sense of self-efficacy believe they can accomplish difficult tasks. Therefore, it is defined as “the conviction that one can successfully execute the behavior required to produce the outcomes” (Bandura, 1977, p. 193).

Self-Esteem - Smith and Mackie (2007) defined self-esteem as, "The self-concept is what we think about the self; self-esteem, is the positive or negative evaluations of the self, as in how we feel about it" (p. 107). Low self-esteem can be characterized by heavy self-criticism, exaggerated fear of mistakes, perfectionism, neurotic guilt, hostility, pessimism, and general

resentment. Abraham Maslow (1970) states that a person must feel accepted, loved, and respected by others and by his or her self in order to be psychologically healthy. Self-esteem is essential in reaching goals and self-actualization. People with low self-esteem tend to have a difficult time making and achieving goals.

Social Cognitive Learning Theory - Albert Bandura presented Social Cognitive Learning Theory (SCLT) in 1986 as a derivative of SCLT. Social Cognitive Learning Theory states that people learn by observing others. This theory provides a framework for understanding, predicting and changing human behavior (Green and Peil, 2009). This theory also “focuses on how children and adults operate cognitively on their social experiences and how these cognitions then influence behavior and development” (Nabavi, 2012, p. 11).

Standardized Testing- According to the Glossary of Education Reform, standardized tests are tests that require all students to answer commonly banked questions or the same questions, and tests are scored in a standard or consistent way. This makes it possible to compare individual students or groups of students’ relative performance. The term “standardization” typically refers to large-scale, multiple-choice question tests given to sizable populations.

Test Anxiety – Anxiety is an emotion that consists of fear and uncertainty and typically appears when a person perceives an event as threatening to one’s self-esteem or ego (Sarason, 1988).

Test anxiety is considered a form of performance anxiety, which means that a perceived threat is linked to, or based upon, how the individual performs on a specific task. Test anxiety is a major factor contributing to a variety of negative outcomes, including psychological distress, academic underachievement, academic failure, and insecurity (Hembree & Baker, 1988). Harris and Coy (2003) report physiological reactions as including increased heart rate, nausea, vomiting, frequent urination, increased perspiration, cold hands, dry mouth, and muscle spasms. “These

reactions may be present before, during, and even after the test is completed. In conjunction with the physiological reactions, emotions such as worry, fear of failure, and panic may be present” (Harris & Coy, 2003, para. 4).

Summary

This chapter has detailed the problem statement, purpose of study, research questions, conceptual framework, definitions, assumptions, and delimitations. Key terms used in the study have also been defined. Chapter 2 provides a literature review of current trends in standardized, high-stakes testing as it relates to students and teachers. This chapter also details Social Cognitive Theory and Achievement Goal Theory as it relates to students and teachers. Chapter 3 describes the qualitative, phenomenological methodology used in the study, including data collection and analysis methods. Chapter 4 includes the results of the interviews broken down into four themes. Chapter 5 discusses findings, makes recommendations for further study and draws conclusions based on data analysis. Appendices include Interview Questions, Invitation to Participate in Research Study, Sample Site Permission Letter, and Participant Informed Consent Forms.

CHAPTER 2

Review of Literature

The North American educational landscape has seen a variety of changes over the past few decades due in large part to government-imposed initiatives for improving student achievement measured by mandated tests. The need for more accountability has led to an increased reliance on high-stakes, standardized testing. School districts are now more accountable for raising test scores, which falls heavily on the shoulders of teachers. These tests can have significant impacts on states, school districts, teachers, and students, including loss of funding (federal and state), poor standing in the educational community, loss of employment for teachers, and higher student retention rates. While these government-imposed initiatives were intended to increase student academic achievement, high-stakes testing also creates social/emotional pressures on stakeholders. What are the effects of these high-stakes, standardized tests on students and teachers? This study explores the question of whether initiatives such as the Common Core of Learning and 21st Century Learning skills are increasing tests scores, student knowledge, and teacher competency, or creating negative effects on students and teachers.

This literature review contains a representative sample of both qualitative and quantitative studies over the past 30 years. The literature was collected from a variety of sources. A majority of the literature in this review includes primary source pieces with a few secondary source scholarly journal articles and books. Acts and Bills have been included in the bibliography as they informed the historical perspective.

The first section of this literature review is a brief historical overview of the political movement towards high-stakes, standardized testing over the last 15 years in the United States.

In order to fully understand the implications and importance of this research, it is necessary to explain how political and economic influences have impacted education by requiring standardization of curriculum and assessment.

The second section examines potential and actual impacts on teachers. Federal and state mandates have created a system of accountability where teacher employment may be affected by student test scores. Due to the pressure to make Annual Yearly Progress (AYP), many teachers have been forced to “teach to the test” and abandon what they believe to be best practices. Some teachers and administrators feel pressured to change test scores rather than face sanctions that would impact their school standing or financial support. Alignment or misalignment of local curriculum with the goals of high-stakes testing is also explored in this section.

The third section of this literature review discusses the social/emotional effects of high-stakes, standardized tests on students. This review analyzes literature to determine strengths, weaknesses and gaps in the research regarding the unintentional effects of such testing on students and how teachers’ perceptions can affect students. How, according to researchers in the field, have these initiatives impacted student self-esteem, retention, dropout rates, and future educational goals? Finally, the correlation between how students may be influenced by teacher perceptions of high-stakes testing is explored.

The final section draws a conclusion from the literature and determines the gaps within the literature to support research into teacher perspectives of high-stakes standardized testing.

Twenty-Year History of Federal Mandates

Since the first schoolhouse opened in the infancy of the United States in 1642, many acts and laws have been passed to standardize education in order to raise test scores to improve student achievement. This is a brief overview of initiatives that have influenced high-stakes,

standardized testing and educational pedagogy over the past 20 years.

No Child Left Behind 2001 (NCLB) was implemented by President George Bush in 2001, only three days after he took office. NCLB reauthorized a 1965 piece of legislation called the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* (ESEA), but also included and expanded upon the four principles for reform: increased accountability, increased choices for both parents and students, greater flexibility for states and school districts, and a stronger emphasis on reading (Linden, 2007). NCLB was re-authorized in 2004 with much controversy surrounding its requirement of high-stakes testing. One of the many concerns of NCLB is that Federal and State Funding are at risk for schools that do not show Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) on the standardized tests. It also required schools to adopt a standards-based curriculum. While it does not designate standards, it has been linked to the Common Core State Standards Initiative, which was created by the Council of Chief School State Officers (CCSSO) and National Governors' Association. According to the CCSSO, and the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, 46 states have voluntarily adopted the Common Core as their core standards; however, states are using the standards in a variety of ways. Some states have begun to opt out of the consortium while others have filed lawsuits against the federal government for a variety of reasons (Hart, 2015).

The next federal initiative was *Race to the Top* (2012) which was enacted by President Barack Obama as his educational initiative. According to The White House (2015),

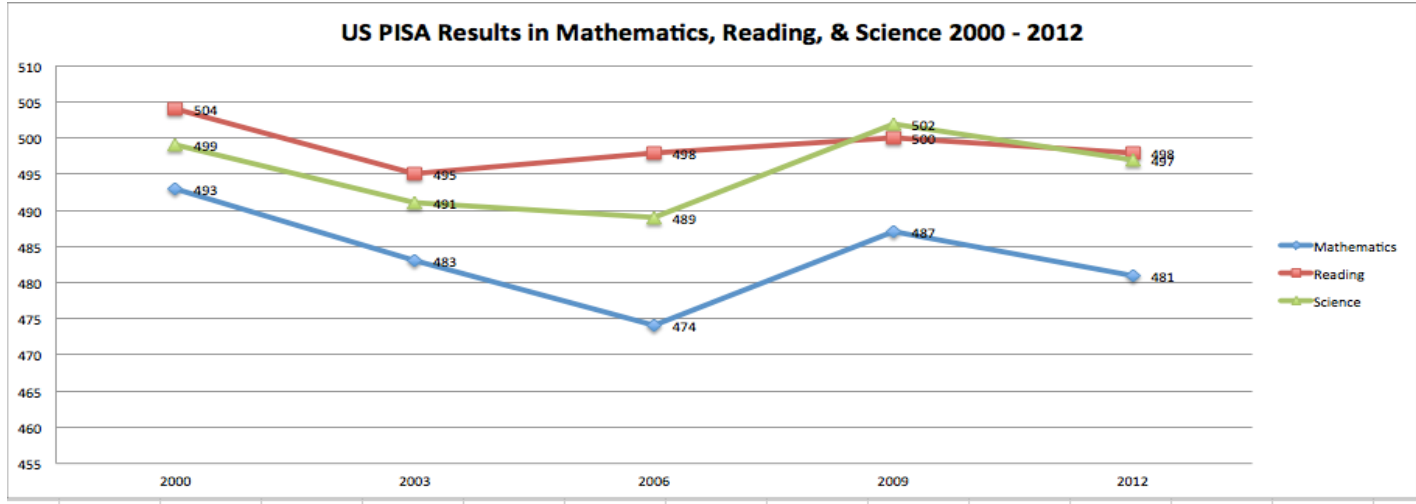
The four key areas of reform include: Development of rigorous standards and better assessments; adoption of better data systems to provide schools, teachers, and parents with information about student progress; support for teachers and school leaders to become more effective; and increased emphasis and resources for the rigorous

interventions needed to turn around the lowest-performing schools.

This initiative provides funds to schools that meet criteria according to the above-mentioned key areas. As of the spring of 2014, 19 states have received funding, 34 states have modified education laws/policies, and 48 states have worked together to create voluntary demanding college- and career-ready standards (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

Throughout the past several decades, political influences at the federal and state levels have changed the landscape of education. These reforms have taken children from home schooling and local one-room schoolhouses to urban “factories” with high-stakes testing as a graduation requirement. Even with the various initiatives, the United States has “never been first in the world, nor even near the top, on international tests” (Ravich, 2013b). In fact, over the past 50 years U.S. students score around the median or even in the bottom quarter of test takers on the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). Table 1 illustrates stagnant, even declining, scores in math, reading and science between 2000 and 2012 on the international PISA tests. (Graph from PISA.org)

Table 2.1 US PISA Results in Mathematics, Reading & Science 2000-2012



Currently, many local school systems and states are attempting to opt out of standardized, high-stakes testing and are allowing parents to opt out of testing for their child/children.

According to The National Center for Fair and Open Testing (2015), “More than 625,000 students refused state tests across the U.S. in 2015.” FairTest Executive Director Monty Neill further explained that “the estimated 625,000 opt-outs in 2015 is low because many states have denied requests to make test refusal data public” (The National Center for Fair and Open Testing, 2015). There is also a movement towards outcome or proficiency-based standards. High-stakes, standardized testing, as well as lack of local control, are some of the reasons states and schools are attempting to opt out of the requirements of NCLB. Furthermore, as Merritt (2014) points out, “Numbers illuminate the fact that standardized tests do not improve student achievement and should not be used as resources to measure student ability” (para. 2).

On December 10, 2015, President Barack Obama signed the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) into law. This Act is intended to “fix” the concerns associated with NCLB. According to the Department of Education (2015), ESSA will:

Hold all students to high academic standards; prepare students for success in college and career; provide more students with high-quality preschool; guarantee steps are taken to help students, and their schools, improve; reduce the burden of testing while maintaining annual information for parents and students; and promote local innovation, and invest in what works. (para. 8)

Currently the Department of Education is planning workshops to inform schools about the implications this new law has for their schools.

Impact of Mandates on Teachers

The design of governmental regulations creates an assumption that policy implementation is linear in nature and is unproblematic (Dorey, 2005), once received by the state and, once again, at the local level. As states, local education agencies, and eventually school leaders and teachers engage in the implementation process, it becomes evident that this hierarchal dissemination of policy results in various interpretations and actions (Hemmer and Baker, 2008).

Pedagogy. Research recognizes that a teacher's classroom practices are influenced by their beliefs and knowledge (Borko & Putnam, 1996). These beliefs and knowledge are a result of their experiences, both as student and teacher, and provide the lens through which they view their practices. Little research has been conducted that addresses teachers' beliefs about best assessment practices. What is of concern is how teachers address high-stakes standardized testing when this practice is at odds with their teaching pedagogy. This places added stress and anxiety on teachers as current initiatives can impact their employment. Studies have shown that teachers will alter initiatives or new practices so that the changes fit more closely with their own existing beliefs (Eisenhart, Cuthbert, Schrum, & Harding, 1988). Davis and Andrzejewski (2009) point out, "In the face of information that challenges their beliefs, such as policy inducement to

reform, to modify/include new populations of students, or to innovate with new technologies, teachers tend to feel threatened (Fecho, 2001; Gregoire, 2003)” (para. 23). This may provide an explanation for why many initiatives fail upon implementation. In the case of high-stakes testing, teachers report that they do not typically utilize test results from high-stakes tests (Magee and Jones, 2012). According to Magee and Jones, (2012) this is especially true when:

Those who believed that knowledge is complex, and that students are unique opposed efforts to assess students’ knowledge via a single test. Further, doubts that standardized tests can provide an objective and unbiased assessment also had an impact on respondents’ opposition to standardized tests. (p. 9)

Teachers also express concerns that the focus of high-stakes testing, “keeps teachers from caring for students’ needs that are separate from how well they do on test scores” (Nichols et al, 2006, p. 3). Magee and Jones (2012) explore the influence epistemology or educational and world-view beliefs have on whether or not a person supports or opposes standardized testing. The results show that people who believe that knowledge is complex opposed standardized testing. The reason being that they feel students are unique and cannot be rated based on one standardized test score.

Furthermore, the results showed this opposition extended out to public policy. Neither knowledge of standards nor past experiences with testing changed or affected these beliefs. Future research related to how often teachers abandon or consider abandoning the profession based on their opposition to high-stakes testing and pedagogical differences would add to the knowledge base of the effects of political policy on education.

High-stakes testing focuses on the areas of Mathematics and English Language Arts. Schools report that academic focus has significantly shifted time spent on math and ELA

instruction and testing, leaving less time for the arts, physical education, science, and social studies. According to Farber (2010), “Many school districts reported increasing time for ELA and math and decreasing time in other subject areas since 2001” (p. 8). Ron Maggiono is quoted by Strauss (2014), as saying:

The overemphasis on testing has led many teachers to eliminate projects and activities that provide students with an opportunity to be creative and imaginative, and scripted curriculum has become the norm in many classrooms. There is nothing creative or imaginative about filling in a bubble sheet for a multiple choice test. (para. 3)

Accountability. Testing proponents and policy makers claim test-based accountability programs hold educators responsible and, thus, raise student achievement (Evers & Walberg 2002, Raymond & Hanushek 2003). As federal and state policies are passed, teachers are often the ones required to implement them. NCLB mandates that “all children” will be at or above proficient levels on state standardized tests by the year 2014. NCLB (2011) also states that the Act provides for “Greater decision making authority and flexibility to schools and teachers in exchange for greater responsibility for student performance” (p. 16). Greater responsibility includes standards-based curriculum alignment, 21st Century Learning skills, proficiency-based systems, and multiple forms of assessment, often with little to no professional development. Teachers are under an increasing amount of pressure to raise student test scores to meet Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) on high-stakes, standardized tests, as their careers could be at stake if test scores do not show improvement. Farber (2010) recalled an interview with a teacher who stated, “This panic causes teachers to throw quality teaching practices out the window, and suddenly schools become stressful test-prep boot camps where dump-truck loads of concepts are crammed, jammed, and force-fed into children’s minds at alarming speeds” (p. 9). Hazi and

Rucinski (2009) state, “What is most disturbing is the false confidence that accompanies numbers, as if they can replace professional judgments about teaching” (p. 14). They pointed out that the Florida system relied so heavily on test scores, which were calculated by a computer, that observer judgments and feedback were replaced by data.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 mandated changes in teacher evaluation policies. One of the changes to teacher evaluation programs is the inclusion of high-stakes test scores as part of a teachers’ evaluation for employment. Hazi and Rucinski (2009) warn, “If states add student progress data to evaluation and subsequently ties it to salary increase, we anticipate more problems and that those problems will surface sooner rather than later” (p. 12). They further discuss that adding this practice will complicate evaluation systems, particularly those that also add “Merit Pay” to their evaluation, and will make the process more ritualistic. This type of mandated practice added to the arena of teacher evaluation may lead to misuse of data.

According to Amrein and Berliner (2002), “punishments are attached to school scores twice as often as rewards. For teachers, low average class scores may prevent teachers from receiving salary increases, may influence tenure decisions, ...[and] high average class scores may also bring about financial bonuses or raises in pay” (p. 6). Strauss (2014) states, “The obsession with standardized tests is promoting a culture of cheating in many schools. Recent cheating scandals involving teachers and administrators in Atlanta and dozens of other cities have been directly linked to the pressure to raise test scores” (para. 7).

The increased pressure on teachers to meet AYP targets is, in some cases, leading to test fraud. Due to mandates such as NCLB and Race to the Top, significant value is placed on high-stakes, standardized test scores, thus causing an increase in test score corruption. In 2015, an Atlanta jury convicted 11 teachers of, “racketeering and other crimes in a standardized test-

cheating scandal” (Strauss, 2015). Teachers, as well as administrators, were under extreme pressure to raise test scores or risk sanctions if goals were not met. In this case, “When principals and teachers could not reach their targets, their performance was criticized, their jobs were threatened and some were terminated” (Strauss, 2015). Sentences ranged from one-year home confinement to up to seven years in prison for these administrators and teachers. All sentences carried a range of fines and community service (Fantz, 2015). It is difficult to measure how frequently this type of cheating on tests occurs as data is limited since teachers and administrators will not readily admit to changing test answers to increase scores due to the consequences they could face.

With increased pressure to show student improvement on high-stakes tests, research shows that an unintended effect of high-stakes testing is “perverse and corrupt educational practices” (Nichols, S., Glass, G., & Berliner, D. 2006, p.2). “Teaching to the test” is one form of such corruption in educational practice. Research reveals that, “standards and state systems of accountability have created a situation wherein teachers teach to the test rather than challenge students to reach their potential” (Knoeppel & Brewer, 2011, p. 7). Haladyna (2006) states that this is, “a type of consumer fraud” (p. 37) as it misleads the public as to what students actually know. Bracey (2000) states, “When a lot is riding on the outcome, teachers will teach test-taking skills, too closely align their teaching with the test, and even cheat occasionally in order to look good, to make their principal or district look good, or to keep their jobs” (p. 16). There are many factors that lead to inconsistencies and contaminants with high-stakes testing. There is limited research on how frequently teachers “teach to the test” or how often other contaminants, such as cheating, test administration, and scoring, actually take place. There is a gap in research as to how often teachers “teach to the test,” as well as how prevalent test corruption may be.

Curriculum Alignment or Misalignment. Research has shed light on the misalignment of curriculum alignment with high-stakes tests. Knoppel and Brewer (2011) state, “The accountability systems currently in place have not effectively linked the testing system to content standards” (p. 7). Recent studies also reveal that current state assessments lack rigor. Research drawn from released test items from 16 states found that a majority of questions were based on basic knowledge and rote memorization. The current high-stakes system forces teachers to teach to the test rather than teach creatively. Shepard (2002) refers to this as *curriculum distortion*. Certain subject areas are prioritized over others, with some, such as the arts, being cut altogether in order to spend more time on math and reading. This change in emphasis results in teachers needing to spend a significant amount of time on core subject areas in order to show Annual Yearly Progress in reading and math. Jones and Egley (2007) found, “Students spend a great deal of time practicing test-taking strategies, which takes time away from learning and increasing content knowledge” (p. 238).

Currently, a vast majority of states have voluntarily adopted the Common Core. Herman and Linn (2014) assess the new Smarter Balance and Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Career (PARCC) consortia’s development of standardized tests based on the Common Core for Learning in a journal article appearing in *Educational Leadership*. According to Herman and Linn’s (2014) assessment, the new standardized tests, which will be field tested during 2014, are more closely aligned to the Common Core for Learning. They contend that the assessments are more rigorous based on a four-level Depth of Knowledge scale. Herman and Linn (2014) point out that their analysis is based primarily on the consortia’s plans and time will tell if the new high-stakes tests are more closely aligned to the Common Core and if they are, in fact, more rigorous. Future research in this area focusing on the new alignment system could

demonstrate whether high-stakes testing is, in fact, more closely aligned to curriculum and assesses individual students on high-level thinking, rather than rote memorization.

Developmental Alignment. Why is it important to look at whether or not the Common Core Standards are developmentally aligned? Past research by Burtis, Hart, and Charlesworth (1992) showed that children exposed to standards that are not developmentally aligned show signs of stress which include, nail biting, finger sucking, hair pulling or twirling, hostility, and nervous laughter. Jones and Egley (2007) found, “Testing has a negative impact on some teachers’ abilities to use effective teaching methods, especially developmentally appropriate practices” (p. 238). Walton (2014) wrote, “According to experts, a poorly conceived set of standards has the potential to be, at best, fruitless and, at worst, detrimental to the youngest kids who are on the frontline of the Common Core” (para. 3). In 2010, the Alliance for Childhood published a *Joint Statement of Early Childhood Health and Education Professionals on the Common Core Standards Initiative*, signed by over 200 educators, pediatricians, developmental psychologists and researchers, stated:

The draft standards made public in January conflict with compelling new research in cognitive science, neuroscience, child development, and early childhood education about how young children learn, what they need to learn, and how best to teach them in kindergarten and the early grades.

According to the list provided by the National Governors’ Association, child development experts and early childhood teachers were excluded from contributing to the design of the Common Core Standards. Strauss (2013) quotes Stephanie Feeney of the University of Hawaii, Chair of the Advocacy Committee of the National Association of Early Childhood Teacher Educators as stating, “The people who wrote these standards do not appear to have any

background in child development or early childhood education” (para. 4). Ravich (2013a) also tells us, “Children in the early elementary grades need teachers who set age-appropriate goals. They should learn to read, write, calculate, and explore nature, and they should have plenty of time to sing and dance and draw and play and giggle” (p. 7), none of which are included in the standards of the Common Core. Further research into the alignment of and subsequent impact of developmental misalignment of standards is needed.

Leadership. There is an ever growing body of literature regarding educational leadership. It would be next to impossible to discuss every style of leadership in this review. For the purposes of this review, Transformational and Transactional Leadership will be addressed. According to Burns (1978) Transactional Leadership “occurs when one person takes the initiative in making contact with others for the purpose of an exchange of valued things” (p. 19). Transformational Leadership, as defined by Burns (1978) “occurs when one or more persons engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality” (p. 20).

Transactional Leadership is a form of leadership where the leader expects compliance from his/her employees and rewards or punishes based on that compliance. The focus is on following a set of rules or guidelines to reach a goal rather than on creating change. This form differs from Transformational leadership, where the focus is on profound, meaningful change and more importantly on “end-values, such as liberty, justice, equality” (Shields, 2010, p. 564). The difference between these forms of leadership is harder to define and they are often used interchangeably. However, the basic difference is that Transformational focuses on only the organization, whereas Transformative focuses on the whole. Bennis and Nanus (2007) state that leaders:

Empower others to translate intention into reality and sustain it. It does not mean that leaders must relinquish power, or that followers must continually challenge authority. It does mean that power must become a unit of exchange--an active, changing token in creative, productive and communicative transactions. (p.74)

Research into how leaders effect change in small, rural schools is needed.

Unintended Effects of Standardized Testing on Students

Tests, high-stakes tests in particular, can be great sources of anxiety for students. Anxiety can cause poor performance on such tests, which increases the level of anxiety students feel. Cizek (2012) states, "Testing produces gripping anxiety in even the brightest students, in any level of education." According to *Sacramento Bee* writers Louey and Chavez (2002), "Test-related jitters, especially among young students, are so common that the Stanford-9 exam comes with instructions on what to do with a test booklet in case a student vomits on it" (para. 6).

These protocols included giving the contaminated test materials back to students if they are deemed able to continue. The SAT has similar protocol provided to test administrators.

According to research conducted by Beidel, Turner, and Trager (1994), upwards of 40 percent of the 200 third through sixth grade students polled reported that they suffer from significant test anxiety. Furthermore, studies have found students who perform poorly on high-stakes testing are more likely to drop out of high school, suffer from low self-esteem and depression and are less likely to seek post-secondary education (Dweck, 2013; Huberty, 2010; Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2006; Putwain, Connors, Woods, & Nicholson, 2012). Shepard (2002) also points out that students who are motivated to do well on tests, instead of working to understand and master material, are consistently disadvantaged in subsequent endeavors. Furthermore, they become less intrinsically motivated, are less willing to persist with difficult problems, and learn less.

Brown, Galassi and Akos (2004) argued that positives related to high-stakes testing are negated by the stress, anxiety, pressure and level of fear students experience as a result of such testing. This research asked school counselors about their perceptions of student perceptions of high-stakes testing. Their respondents reported children having lower confidence and self-esteem, feeling incompetent, being labeled by their teachers, or having behavior problems that lead to an increase in suspensions. Several research studies report children freezing with fear during testing, feeling anxious, being unable to sleep, feeling confused, crying, feeling frustration, having headaches, throwing up, and feeling incompetent as responses to the stress incited by testing (Brown et al 2004; Flores & Clark, 2003; Madaus, Russell & Higgins, 2010; Paris & Envoy, 2000). As cited by Polesel, Dulfer and Turnbull (2012), Emery and Ohanian (2004) ask why we send our children “to a place that makes them vomit” rather than one where they are nurtured (2004, p. 9).

Anxiety and Depression. Research is revealing that students have significant adverse effects from standardized testing, such as anxiety and the development of poor self-esteem issues. Huberty (2010) raises concerns that test anxiety can lead to lower self-confidence and self-esteem, less motivation, and depression. Increased pressure, such as high-stakes testing, is likely to worsen and/or increase other anxieties and deepen depression. While some students looked forward to the tests, others expressed feelings of anxiety, nervousness, panic, and fear about their performance (Putwain, Connors, Woods, & Nicholson, 2012). DeNoon (2015) reports that children who suffer from anxiety are more likely to have teen depression. “About half of depressed teens had some sort of a childhood anxiety disorder” (DeNoon, 2015, para. 10).

Putwain, et. al. (2012) interviewed students who expressed concerns about retention, graduation, and career after learning about their test scores. Other students interpreted their

scores and believed that if they did well on these tests they would be placed in higher ability groups as they moved into high school, which would in turn lead to better jobs. Some students viewed these tests as positively affecting their future, while others viewed them negatively.

Test anxiety is considered a form of performance anxiety. There are three categories of symptoms that can present themselves in children. Physical symptoms can include headache, nausea, diarrhea, excessive sweating, shortness of breath, rapid heartbeat, and light-headedness. According to the Anxiety and Depression Association of America (2015), test anxiety can lead to panic attacks causing children to feel as if they cannot breathe or are having a heart attack. Emotional symptoms include feeling helpless, disappointed, angry or afraid. Finally, behavioral/cognitive symptoms present themselves as negative thoughts, difficulty concentrating, and constant comparison to other students.

Grant and Dweck (2013) studied the variations and effects that different types of goals have on performance. Performance goals are defined as goals that assess a student's ability whereas learning goals are defined as obtaining new skills or knowledge. Performance goals are shown to debilitate students and create a sense of vulnerability and helplessness in the face of setback, especially when the outcome indicates a lack of ability (Ames, 1992; Elliot & Dweck, 1988; Grant and Dweck, 2013). Learning goals are shown to create a sense of persistence in the face of setbacks. Further research could reveal how educators could detect patterns in students as to whether or not test scores will have an effect on their overall self-esteem and well-being. According to Grant and Dweck (2013), test creators could then use this information when designing test questions in order to account for such variables.

Thus far, research has shown limited to no correlation between testing pressure and increased test scores. Nichols, Glass, and Berliner (2006) correlated data on fourth and eighth

grade standardized math tests and found pressures may have caused an increase in assessment scores in some subgroups but not in others. When outliers were removed from the statistical information, the increase in score fell to almost zero. As a result, this study showed that there was little to no evidence that increased pressure raises test scores or improves instruction as a result.

Dropout Rates. One of the objectives of the recent political reforms is to reduce drop-out rates. However, current research reveals that students continue to drop out at alarming rates, especially after failing standardized tests. Allensworth (2005) discussed a link between Chicago's High-stakes Policy (HST) of retaining students who fail the eighth grade proficiency test and dropout rates. Chicago's dropout rate for several years has been historically higher than the national average. This research revealed that the first three years of the cohorts, who were retained in the eighth grade based on high-stakes, standardized testing had a slightly higher dropout rate compared to students who were not retained. However, this leveled out after the fourth and fifth year of the study. According to Haladyna (2006), "Graduation rates are negatively correlated with high-stakes testing, and the rate of GED testing is increasing in high-stakes testing states" (p. 38). Furthermore, a recent study by Warren, Jenkins, and Kulick (2006) on the impact of high-stakes testing on graduation rates showed an increase in dropout rates.

Farber (2010) reported that a district in Houston, Texas, that was recognized for successfully raising test scores:

Claimed a low 1.5 percent drop-out rate, but at Sharpston High School, 463 of 1,700 students left during the school year; none were reported as dropping out. Instead, they were assigned a code that meant they had changed schools, gone back to a native country,

or gone for their GED, when many of them never reported these reasons to the school. (p. 13)

The result is that a new correlation has arisen between falling graduation rates and standardized test scores. This raises the question of whether or not dropout rates are being adequately reported. The number of students dropping out may be under-reported due, in part, to high-stakes testing.

Self-Concept/Esteem and Stereotyping. Students interviewed after failing a reading proficiency test reported feelings of shame, shock at having failed when they thought they had passed, confusion about the divergence between test scores, class performance, and failure. Some students were concerned about their futures in school, some were ashamed that they could not advance and some dropped out (Kearns, 2011). Reay and William (1999) conducted a case study where they found negative self-perceptions as a result of test results. They also found significant anxiety related to testing, even among high-achieving students. One child in this study, rather than seeing herself as a creative and good problem solver, perceived herself as a failure. Children in this study also expressed concerns regarding their future prospects, fearing that they might predict future failure and hardship.

Stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995) refers to the risk of confirming a negative stereotype about a group in a particular performance domain. Stereotype threat theory suggests that popular negative stereotypes about the abilities of certain groups, when pointed out or made important for individuals who belong to those groups, triggers underperformance. The possibility of confirming negative performance stereotypes becomes salient either when primed, or when tasks are framed as diagnostic of ability. Negative performance effects related to stereotype threat have also been demonstrated for several different populations, in a variety of performance

domains.

Few studies have examined the stereotype threat performance effects on young children. Ambady et al. (2003) suggested that even as early as early elementary grades, children show shifts in performance associated with the activation of positive and negative stereotypes. These stereotypes can include ideas such as girls are bad at math, boys are bad at spelling, Asian people are good at math, and so on.

Aronson et al. (1999) utilized a 2 (threat condition) x 2 (domain identification) design to show that participants who highly identified with their math performance performed poorly on a mathematics test when a negative stereotype pertaining to their group was activated versus when that stereotype was not activated. This did not hold true for students who reported a low level of identification with their mathematics performance. Therefore, when a student ties his/her own identity to his/her performance on a standardized test, a negative stereotype is most threatening and indicative of performance. Threatening situational pressure thus has greater effect on a subset of the stereotyped group that places higher importance on the standardized test results. Wassenberg (2009) states, "In such cases, students who are domain-identified will not only have traditional testing concerns, but also the added pressure of not confirming a prevailing stereotype about their group" (p. 3).

Marginalized and At-Risk Students. President Lyndon Johnson passed the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* in 1965 as part of his "War on Poverty" stating that all children deserved an equal opportunity in education regardless of their economic status. President Clinton re-authorized that act in the *Improving American Schools Act* in 1994. Current research indicates that the intended outcome of school reform on marginalized or at-risk students is failing the students it is intended to support (Kearns, 2011). Peters and Oliver (2009) discuss a tendency to

disregard differences in “the needs, talents, and achievements of different students, especially those from minorities and those with disabilities and special needs” (p. 269). Special needs students are often required to take these tests without the accommodations they receive in the regular classroom setting. Concern has also been raised by parents, teachers, and administrators as to the appropriateness of English Language Learners taking standardized tests before they have mastered the English Language. In a study conducted in four sites on English Language Learners, Abedi (2002) found, “ELL students generally perform lower than non-ELL students on reading, science, and math subtests. The level of impact of language proficiency on the assessment of ELL students is greater in content areas with a higher level of language demand—a strong indication of the impact of English language proficiency on assessment” (p. 254).

Research shows that when creating and conducting standardized tests, developers do not take into consideration variables that are unique to at-risk or marginalized students. Kearns (2011) discusses variables including, family, race, gender, community, and economic status, which can have a significant impact on a student’s ability to perform at a proficient level on standardized tests. Younger children from low socioeconomic or minority backgrounds are especially vulnerable to the “deleterious effects” of high-stakes testing as they may lack home support (Perrone, 1991). This is supported by a variety of research that states that the playing field for many students is not equal (Allensworth, 2005; Haladyna, 2006; Wasserberg, 2009).

Teacher Perceptions of Students. Research confirms that a teacher’s perceptions about a student’s academic abilities can influence that student’s performance both positively and negatively (Cooper & Good, 1983; Cooper & Tom, 1984; and Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968) According to Cooper and Good (1983), “Sustaining expectations effects occur when teachers respond on the basis of their existing expectations of students” (p. 17). According to Merton

(1957) this is a self-fulfilling prophecy, which occurs when “a false definition of the situation evokes a new behavior which makes the original false conception come true” (p. 423). Cooper and Tom (1984) state, “Teachers’ beliefs about the improvement a student will make might also be expected to create self-fulfilling prophecies” (p. 78). It stands to reason then that a teacher’s anxiety and negative feeling towards high-stakes testing could influence student perception of such tests. Research in this area is limited and needs further exploration to determine if there is a correlation between teacher anxiety and student anxiety as it relates to high-stakes standardized testing.

Discussion

“I saw one teacher tell a class of nine- and ten-year-olds, “These test scores will go on your permanent record which will follow you for the rest of your life! Several students in my class, as well as others around the school, vomited on the day of the test. One boy, Dennis, could not stop shaking” (Brown, 2011, para. 4). With such high-stakes it is little wonder that students are showing signs of significant anxiety that lead to depression, low self-esteem, behavior problems and higher dropout rates. Strauss (2013) wrote, “Teachers’ and principals’ jobs – indeed the entire existence of the school – can hinge on the results, creating a super-charged atmosphere for the students that stresses them and robs them of valuable instructional time.” Teachers also feel the pressure of these high-stakes tests as many do not believe this is the best practice.

There is significant agreement that there must be some valid way to measure individual student, state, and national educational ability, however, the method of high-stakes, standardized testing is in need of remodeling. Numbers illuminate the fact that standardized tests do not improve student achievement and should not be used as resources to measure student ability.

Current research indicates that high-stakes, standardized testing has significant negative impacts on students. The resulting effect for some students is anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem. This can lead to frustration, marginalization, and higher dropout rates. There is little to no indication that the pressures put on students to perform well on these tests promote higher test scores. As Merritt (2014) points out, “Numbers illuminate the fact that standardized tests do not improve student achievement and should not be used as resources to measure student ability” (para. 2).

Within the literature for this review, there are few pieces that include student voices. How students view their high-stakes standardized testing and the impact it may have on their self-esteem could determine the future of this type of testing. Gay (2007) points out that, “Achievement gaps will continue and even expand; more and more children will be victimized and then punished for being victims” (p. 291). The monumental importance of test-taking has been so engrained into students, that for many, passing the test means passing the grade, and failure means being left back. Going to school means just one thing: test preparation (Brown, 2011). Bracey, quoted by Merritt (2014) states, “qualities that standardized tests cannot measure include creativity, critical thinking, resilience, motivation, persistence, curiosity, endurance, reliability, enthusiasm, empathy, self-discipline, leadership and integrity” (para. 4).

Teachers are under a great deal of pressure to implement Federal and State initiatives, usually with little to no support or professional development. Currently, most teachers are moving to alignment with the Common Core and 21st Century Learning skills, shifting to a proficiency-based system, administering Smarter Balance and other standardized tests, and being held accountable for all student learning. Research indicates that the pressure for some teachers is so great that they may contaminate test results as their careers may be at stake. Cho and

Eberhard (2013) point out that, “Without taking teacher’s subjective worlds into consideration, it is generally noted that educational change is unlikely to occur the way it was intended” (p. 4). Furthermore, Wagner (2008) echoes this concern by pointing out that teachers may be disillusioned, as they have seen so many failed education fads. It is important to examine how teacher perceptions on mandates influence student behavior.

Politics have played an increasingly larger role in educational policy debates over the past several decades. Some politicians argue that, even though the various acts that have been passed are intended to improve the educational system for all students, the system currently in place does not advance disadvantaged students. Instead, it promotes the social order (Erickson, 2014; Ward, 2008). Erickson (2014) states:

The fundamental issue today is not choice or standards or accountability, but poverty--a topic which the national conversation about education has so far failed to address. We know that socio-economic status is positively correlated with academic achievement, meaning that the higher a students' socio-economic status is, the more likely he or she is to do well in school. But neither NCLB specifically, nor the broader testing and accountability movement, considers this factor in evaluations of AYP. (para. 8)

Most studies indicate that students from lower income areas do not do well on standardized tests, causing many to fail to graduate and/or to drop out. According to Strauss (2014):

Standardized tests are not helping to prepare students for college or careers. After more than a dozen years of the No Child Left Behind and Race to the Top eras in which high-stakes tests have dominated, students are no more ready to do well in college than they were before — and many are less so. Corporate CEOs complain that students aren’t learning the kinds of skills needed to succeed in the modern workplace. (para. 10)

In 2012, the United States spent \$106.7 million on education. With such a large commitment of resources, accountability is important. With a political push towards proficiency-based, standards-based systems and 21st century learning skills, the political agenda would benefit from research that includes student and teacher input on the importance of skills and best practice assessment. According to Vu (2008), annual spending on standardized tests rose from \$423 million in 2002 to almost \$1.1 billion in 2008. However, the National Research Council report from 2011 found no evidence that test-based incentive programs are working: “Despite using them for several decades, policymakers and educators do not yet know how to use test-based incentives to consistently generate positive effects on achievement and to improve education.” With this data in hand, the undue stress and anxiety caused by these tests is perhaps “...the most important factor in determining whether they should still be used” (Merritt, 2014 p. S-4).

Conceptual Framework

As an educator, I am saddened and concerned by the level of high-stakes tests that students are currently required to take. The intent of this qualitative research study is to examine the perspectives of teachers of the impact of federal and state mandates in their classrooms and on their students. Teachers who work with students in small, isolated communities potentially have more detailed insight on their students’ day to day lives and activities and therefore provide a more comprehensive picture of the effects of mandates on their students’ emotional well-being as it relates to standardized testing.

Many educators believe that in order to help their students be successful they need to encourage creativity and risk-taking by establishing a caring and nurturing environment. The North American educational landscape has seen a variety of changes over the past few decades

due, in large part, to government-imposed initiatives resulting in a plethora of high-stakes standardized testing, which may be undermining teachers' abilities to create such caring learning communities. Test anxiety has become a progressively widespread issue reaching back a generation (Speilberger & Vagg, 1995).

Thus far, much of the research has focused on the effects of test anxiety at the high school level, with little attention focused on how test anxiety may or may not affect elementary and middle school students. Research is revealing that some secondary school-age students have significant adverse effects from standardized testing, such as anxiety and self-esteem issues. Huberty (2009) raises concerns that test anxiety can lead to lower self-confidence and self-esteem, effect motivation, and lead to depression. Increased pressure, such as high-stakes testing, is likely to worsen and/or increase other anxieties and deepen depression. Some students looked forward to the tests, while others expressed feelings of anxiety, nervousness, panic, and fear about their performance (Putwain, Connors, Woods, & Nicholson, 2012).

The extensive testing of young children increases the need to consider the effects of such testing on student behavior and emotional health, as well as test performance. The Alliance for Childhood asked policymakers to consider the toll taken by high-stakes testing, which includes symptoms ranging from stomachaches to insomnia and depression (Cole, 2001). "As students' lives become more and more impacted by their test scores, it is critical that test anxiety and behavior changes in children be explored and documented" (Landry, 2005, pg. 9). Giving students a voice in how they perceive testing and how it affects them is a critical consideration as we move forward with high-stakes testing.

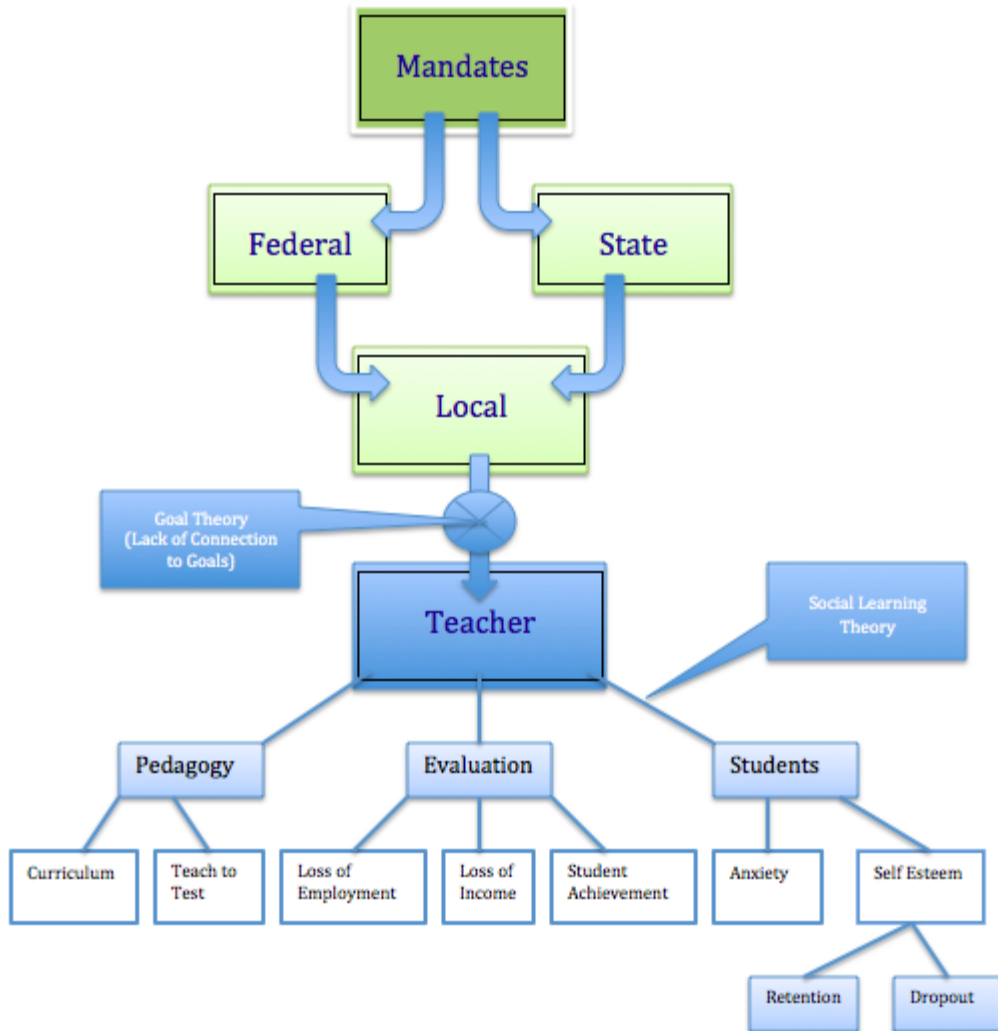
Much of the focus of teachers and administrators is on meeting standards and showing improvement in test scores. School funding, curriculum implementation, teacher careers, and

student retention, among others, are topics of conversation surrounding high-stakes testing. What is missing from these conversations is the impact on children. It is vital to understand the impacts of testing on elementary student behavior and emotional well-being and to ask the question, how are high-stakes testing mandates affecting teachers' ability to maintain a caring and nurturing classroom with the pressures of federal, state, and local initiatives to raise test scores?

This research study was grounded in Goal Theory or Goal Attainment. Higgins, Shah and Freidman (1997) explain Goal Attainment is, "The perceived value of an event is the extent to which it fulfills the perceivers goals" (p. 515). Positive outcomes produce good feelings, while negative outcomes produce bad feelings. Goal attainment can also produce emotional responses related to whether one's perceived self is in line with one's desired self. The strength of this emotional response is related to the accessibility of the goal. In the case of high-stakes testing, how accessible are the goals and to what degree do children and teachers relate the attainment of these goals to self?

Table 2.2 Graphic Conceptual Framework

Conceptual Framework: Federal and State Mandates to Teacher Perspectives



Conclusion

“The children are the voiceless, unwitting victims of this hijacking of their precious school days” (Brown, 2011). Teacher and student voices are a missing piece from the unintended effects of federal and state mandates, including high-stakes standardized testing. Their voices are necessary to advocate for changes in federal and state mandates that will allow teachers and

students to pursue academics in a creative, non-threatening, safe and nurturing environment. Further research, including student voices, will add to the conversation by answering the question as to why students suffer from anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem as a result of high-stakes testing. Inclusion of teachers' professional insights will add clarity in the establishment of a fair and equitable accountability system. Understanding how teacher opinions on testing and best practice may influence student thinking and reaction will help to shed light on how to better work with children to alleviate these negative effects and create a nurturing environment for these children.

Thus far, research that includes teachers' and students' perspectives on the impact of state and federal mandates, including high-stakes testing and accountability is limited. Available research shows some students suffer from anxiety and self-esteem issues as a result of these tests (Putwain, Connors, Woods, & Nicholson, 2012). Teachers are often the ones who implement state and federal initiatives, typically without appropriate professional development to support them (Cho & Eberhard, 2013). Their careers are in jeopardy in many cases based on how well their students perform on these tests. Hazi and Rucinski (2009) say, "It seems unlikely to us that state department involvement viewed as increasingly invasive and controlling will lead to the development of ideal learning conditions aimed at improving teacher capacity" (p. 14).

CHAPTER 3

Methodology

This chapter includes an overview of the research design, research setting, participant recruitment, researcher's role, data collection and analysis, ethical considerations, and methodological rigor.

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study was to examine the perceptions and experiences of teachers as they relate to federal and state mandates and the effects of such mandates on students in order to: identify those aspects of the phenomenon which are similar or dissimilar among the participants, identify the priorities and influences which affect the participant's experiences with the phenomenon, and identify the most critical issues which provide understanding of the experiences which help to define the essence of the phenomenon.

The use of semi-structured, individual interviews was to reveal the participants' attitudes, thought processes, emotions, understanding and connection to federal and state mandates. Participants' perceptions also revealed how their teaching pedagogy affected their classroom implementation of mandates. Finally, interviews revealed teacher perceptions of how their students connect with, understand, and are affected by mandates. The focus of this study was to identify commonalities and differences in the ways that teachers experience the phenomenon by analyzing, interpreting, and implementing mandates and the perceived effects on themselves and their students. (See Appendix 1: Sample Interview Questions)

The overarching essential research question for this study was *How do federal and state mandated high-stakes tests impact teachers and students in grades two through eight in small, isolated public schools?* Questions investigated were: What are the pressures, challenges and responsibilities of implementing federal mandates on teachers who work in small, isolated

communities? Sub questions are: Have teachers changed their curriculum and daily activities in order to teach to the test? How do these federal mandates align with their own teaching pedagogy? Do teachers perceive their school's curriculum to be fully aligned with the goals of standardized tests? Are the goals of federal mandates fully understood and/or supported by teachers given the nature of the target being in continual flux? Do students understand the goals of these mandated tests? and How do teachers perceive their students' levels of self-esteem, self-efficacy, and anxiety as they relate to the pressures of high-stakes testing?

Questions were investigated through the theoretical lenses of both goal theory and social cognitive (learning) theories. Goal theory was used to determine the level to which teachers and students are connected to and understand the mandated goals they are required to achieve. Social learning theory was used to investigate the effects of teacher/student relationship and whether or not they have been affected by high-stakes testing or other mandates.

This qualitative phenomenological study documented the experiences of teachers who work in small, geographically isolated, public schools. Phenomenology theory investigates the meaning of the lived experience and perceptions of research participants, as described by the participants. This design is qualitative as it seeks to examine people in their work/community setting in an attempt to make sense of, or interpret the perceptions they develop from their experiences within the context of the phenomenon under study (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The study is phenomenological as it seeks to understand and construct meaning of the lived experiences and perceptions of the study participants (Creswell, 2013).

Personal Bias

Creswell (2013) says:

The researcher brackets himself or herself out of the study by discussing personal experiences with the phenomenon. This does not take the researcher completely out of the study, but it does serve to identify personal experiences with the phenomenon as to partly set them aside so that the researcher can focus on the experiences of the participants in the study. (p. 78)

Bracketing is a device that requires deliberate putting aside of one's own beliefs about the research subject or phenomenon under investigation prior to and throughout the phenomenological investigation (Carpenter, 2007). The researcher "brackets" his or her own experience in order to better understand the experiences of the participants. In the case of this study, the researcher teaches in one of the geographically isolated schools but not within the grade spans being studied. Creswell (2013) states, "A phenomenological study describes the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon. Phenomenologists focus on describing what all participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon" (p. 76). According to Welman and Krueger as quoted by Groenewald (2004), "The phenomenologists are concerned with understanding social and psychological phenomena from the perspectives of the people involved" (p. 5).

The researcher is currently employed at one of the site locations within the study and is colleague to some of the study participants. The researcher also resides in one of the geographically isolated communities and has a unique understanding of this site. As a student, the researcher has always suffered from test anxiety and has felt the effects of poor test scores which did not accurately reflect her knowledge in a given subject area. As a teacher, it is difficult

to watch students struggle with a testing environment which causes them stress and anxiety, especially younger students. The researcher also feel the pressures of implementing state and federal mandates that are required of the small school setting, especially those that do not align with her teaching pedagogy.

Setting

This study was conducted in three small, public, K-12, geographically isolated schools. These schools are small with populations ranging from 60-250 students. Class sizes tend to be significantly smaller than in most public schools. Many of the teachers in these schools are veteran teachers who reside in the communities where their school is located. In most cases, teachers have known their students since birth. This setting may help to promote closer relationships between students and teachers. Therefore, teachers may be more acutely aware of signs of test anxiety in their students.

Workloads to manage and implement federal and state mandates in small schools typically fall directly upon the shoulders of teachers. Within larger schools, the workload to implement mandates is shared among many teachers or specialists. However, in small schools very few staff members share the same workload for mandate implementation. Teacher perspective in this area will help to shed light on the pressures of federal and state mandates on teachers.

These sites were ideal for conducting a phenomenological study as the geographical isolation provides for cultural similarities and shared experiences. (See Appendix 2: Sample Site Permission Letter)

Participants/Sample

Purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) guided the selection of the participants who would provide information-rich cases for the most effective use of this limited resource. Purposeful sampling involves the identification and selection of individuals who are especially knowledgeable about or experienced with the phenomenon being studied (Creswell, 2013). Individual interviews were conducted with each of the nine participants with questions designed to elicit rich descriptions related to their beliefs about teaching and learning, the impact mandates have had on their experiences in the teaching field, and the effects mandates have on their students. Permission was obtained from the administration of each of the three participating school. (See Appendix 3: Invitation to Participate in a Research Study)

Data

This study is a qualitative study grounded in phenomenological theory. This is a specific research project to “seek to discover and understand a phenomena, a process, or the perspectives and world views of the people involved” (Merriam, 1998, p. 11). Phenomenology examines the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experiences of a group of people as they relate to a particular phenomenon (van Manen, 1990). This study inquired into the nature of the impacts of federal and state mandates on nine teachers who teach grades two through eight in small, public, geographically isolated schools.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews and teacher notes. One-on-one, semi-structured, in-depth interviews allow researchers to elicit first-person, detailed, right accounts of the phenomena being studied. Smith and Osborn (2007) inform us,

With semi-structured interviews, the investigator will have a set of questions on an interview schedule, but the interview will be guided by the schedule rather than be dictated by it. Here then:

- There is an attempt to establish rapport with the respondent.
- The ordering of questions is less important.
- The interviewer is free to probe interesting areas that arise.
- The interview can follow the respondent's interests or concerns (p. 58).

This is important because “Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher and the participant to engage in a dialogue in real time. They also give enough space and flexibility for original and unexpected issues to arise, which the researcher may investigate in more detail” (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2014, p. 10).

Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Participant interviews were transcribed and member checked for accuracy. Participants were given copies of their transcription and were given an opportunity to add to or clarify any information. The researcher then read and re-read through the data and highlight quotes, “significant statements,” and sentences. Moustakas (1994) refers to this as horizontalization. Moustakas (1994) explains this as, “an interweaving of person, conscious experience, and phenomenon. In the process of explicating the phenomenon, qualities are recognized and described; every perception is granted equal value, non-repetitive constituents of experiences are lined thematically, and a full description is derived” (p. 96).

From the highlighted information, clusters of meaning were developed. These statements were used to write a textural description based on what the participant experienced. Data was used to write a structural description which Creswell (2013) describes as “a description of the context or setting that influenced how the participants experienced the phenomenon” (p. 82).

Moustakas (1994) adds yet another step which includes the researcher writing about their own experiences as well as the contexts or setting that have influenced their experience with the phenomenon. Creswell (2013) then informs the researcher to write “a composite description that presents the “essence” of the phenomenon, called the essential, invariant structure” (p. 82). This piece focuses on the common experiences of all the participants. In describing a phenomenological study, Merriam (2009) quotes Polkinghorn (1989, p. 46) as stating, “I understand better what it is like for someone to experience that” (p. 26).

Themes were combined, reduced, and organized into four themes: (1) teacher pedagogy, relationships, and location; (2) the process of implementation of mandates; (3) impacts of mandates on teachers, classrooms, and leadership; and (4) students – perceptions of understandings and emotional impacts. Participant profiles were developed based on the three themes presented in Chapter 4. To ensure accurate representation of participant perception, transcripts were returned to participants for “member checks.” The findings of this study are a combination of description and analysis with an eye to observing the unique perceptions of teachers working and living in a small, isolated, public school communities as they relate to federal and state mandates.

Analysis

This qualitative study was analyzed using the Constant Comparison Method as described by Anfara and Mertz (2015, p. 122). This method required the researcher to read and re-read interview transcripts to allow themes to emerge. The next stage involved looking for connections between emerging themes and grouping them together based on conceptual similarities. Each cluster was given a descriptive label and a determination was made as to whether or not the cluster was relevant to the phenomenon under investigation. A decision was made about which

themes to focus on based on relevance to the phenomenon under investigation.

Analysis then moved to writing a final statement, which outlined the meanings inherent to the participants' experiences. During this stage, themes were translated into a narrative account where they were explained, illustrated, and nuanced. Presentation of analysis consisted of two sections. The first is the "results" section containing the emergent thematic analysis. The second is a discussion, which is linked to the literature.

Participant Rights

Permissions were obtained from the administration of each participating school. Confidentiality and anonymity of participants was of utmost importance. Due to the location of this study, confidentiality was a concern that was handled with great care. With so few students, it is, at times, easy to identify individual students. (For example, the sixth grade in one school has only two students, one of each gender. This grade in this particular school will not be selected due to the ability to easily identify each student.) Teachers face the same dilemmas with ease of identification. Therefore, all markers were deleted from records including, name, age, gender, location of school, grade level taught, and specific number of years in the profession. All data collected will be kept in an encrypted file with all identifiers removed in order to protect teacher identity. This was explained to all potential participants along any potential negative effects. Participants signed a Participant Informed Consent form. (See Appendix 4: Participant Consent Form)

Participation in this study was voluntary; furthermore, participants were informed that they could opt out of the study at any time and for any reason without recourse and their information would not be included in the study.

Conflicts of interest were investigated as the research included the location of employment of the researcher. However, two-thirds of the participating schools are located outside of the researcher's district.

Potential Limitations

This study was conducted in three, K-12, public, geographically isolated schools in Maine with participants who teach grades two through eight. The economic and social experiences vary from location to location. School enrollment in these schools varies from 65 to 250 students. Additionally, this study was limited to interviewing nine teachers in grades two through eight based on the suggestion from Seidman (2006) that a sample size of five to twenty-five participants is appropriate for a phenomenological study. Therefore, participant selection was limited as there are only a finite number of individuals who met the criteria of the parameters of the study.

Although this study sought to describe and understand the experiences of these teachers and their students, caution should be used in transferring conclusions of this study to other settings as this study focuses on a unique set of schools. Given these limitations, the results may still be generalized to other rural schools because of the focus of the design of the study to examine the impact of Federal and State mandates on teachers and their students in similar settings. The settings selected in this study were geographically isolated, small, public schools. Participants residing in these isolated communities have continual contact with students and parents, which provides teachers with a uniquely intimate understanding of their students. From rich descriptions created through participant interviews and in-depth analysis, readers of this study can determine the level of transference and generalization to other sites.

While this study was conducted in geographically unique schools, the impact on teachers throughout the profession in many communities can be reflected in the results. Teachers are all under increased pressure to raise test scores, implement curriculum changes, and take care of their students' academic and emotional needs. However, teachers in these setting have a more personal connection to students and at the same time also have a heavier implementation work load. Students are under increased pressure and scrutiny to perform well on tests as they are more heavily weighted statistically due to small class sizes. The findings of this study illustrate potential limitations and globalizations to multiple teaching and learning communities while creating insights into the impact on specific rural and isolated communities.

CHAPTER 4

Data Analysis

This study examines the perceptions of nine teachers about the impact of federal and state mandates on them and their students. Chapter 4 addresses the core research questions that guided the description and analysis of the interviews conducted for this study. Chapter 4 presents descriptions of the four themes that emerged during the data analysis process. It provides contextual information about the teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning, the process of implementation of mandates, how those mandates affect their classrooms, and how they perceive testing effects their students.

The foundation for the analysis presented in this chapter includes meaningful statements which were created through a multi-step process in which interview text was condensed into clusters of meanings, which formed the themes presented. These provided first-person accounts of the participants' perceptions which represent both their individual and collective experiences with state and federal mandates.

Chapter 4 is organized around four themes. The first section provides information about teacher pedagogy, relationships, and the location in which they live and teach. In this section, participants described their beliefs about teaching and learning, the importance of building strong relationships, and how the location where they live and teach impacts their beliefs. The second section describes the general process of the implementation of mandates in each of the three schools included in the study. This theme addresses the process of implementation, the impact of teacher workloads in small schools, and how leadership affects the decision making process. The third theme addresses the implementation of specific mandates. This theme addresses specific mandates, especially high-stakes testing, and their effects on classrooms and teaching pedagogy.

The final theme describes teacher perceptions of the impacts of high- and low-stakes testing on their students. The descriptions provided in these four themes provide important contextual information about the participants' perceptions as they related to the phenomenon under study.

Theme One: Pedagogy, Relationships, Location, and Alignment

Theme One paints a picture of the participants' overall beliefs about teaching and learning, how they build and maintain relationships with students, and how their unique location serves to enhance teaching and learning through these strong relationships. Teacher beliefs about teaching and learning play a critical role in how they organize their classrooms, connect to curriculum, relate to students, and implement mandates. Participants included in this study were eager to share stories and talk about their beliefs about teaching and learning. This theme provides a context for participants' attitudes and experiences as they relate to their beliefs about teaching and learning and how they align with federal and state mandates.

Pedagogy. All participants included in this study gave detailed information about their beliefs about teaching and learning. All participants discussed the importance of understanding the individual learning needs of each and every student they work with that are critical to student success. All students have unique learning styles, interests, strengths, and challenges. "I've always thought that, and I know that we all learn differently, what works for one kid, or one adult even, doesn't always work for another" (*Morgan, interview, May 3, 2016*). All participants talked about meeting the needs of individual students rather than following one specific methodology of teaching. Participants described their teaching philosophies to include multi-modal, experiential, a constructivist, and a non-foundational social constructivist. What all of these methodologies have in common is their beliefs in relationship building and following the

learner. One participant referred to taking pieces of many methodologies as “cherry picking” so he can use what he needs in order to meet individual student needs.

Several teachers discussed their belief in experiential, place-based, and hands-on learning as being important in their small, isolated schools. One participant described her pedagogy as:

A combination of collecting data and making sense of data and group work and individual work and providing different opportunities and different types of interactions around content that helps students learn. I think, understanding students and how they learn and planning lessons around that helps, too. But not being afraid to challenge them and not being afraid of introducing that challenge as such. (*Avery, interview, April 29, 2016*)

Another participant talked about her approach to teaching as:

My belief about teaching and learning is to meet every kid where they are, that is where I have always come from. To be able to differentiate, to be able to set up a learning experience that is going to be, as much as possible, to be individualized and meaningful for that specific student. The best way to interact with students is definitely not with bias, just accepting each one of them the way they are. I try to be hands-on as much as possible, but I also realize that kids learn in many different ways so I try to hit all those different areas whether it is visual, whether it is kinesthetic, whether it is experiential. I think I am pretty eclectic about that. I don't really hone in on this is what I do all the time. I guess I try my best to keep it hands-on as much as possible and to be more of a facilitator than a lecturer so to speak. (*River, interview, April 30, 2016*)

One participant told a story in which she took students outside when discussing sustainability in order to make real world connections. She stated:

That is sort of my philosophy of teaching, is just being right there and doing it. Being, well, doing it in the real way, doing what scientists would do. (*Jamie, interview, April 30, 2016*)

Continuing in this vein, Cameron talked about the importance of providing materials that are age appropriate and that students can engage with. She said:

I think that kids learn best when they can engage with the materials at a level that is appropriate for them. When they can see the relevance of the materials, and I teach [subject area] and so sometimes the relevance is to have a more enriched existence. Kids learn best when they feel like they are being listened to. So I really really try to, again teach relevant content. (*Cameron, interview, May 1, 2016*)

Several study participants also discussed the need for setting high expectations for all of their students. An example of these conversations are illustrated by Jamie who stated:

I have very high expectations. My kids, when they work, when they need to make corrections-they are expected to make corrections. You know they just, we just go through it, it is never punitive, it is just we have to keep working on that. We have to figure out how to get this. (*Jamie, interview, April 30, 2016*)

All participants shared stories about their classrooms. In order to protect participants' identities, some of these stories cannot be told. However, some stories were generic enough to not reveal the participant's identity. The stories told were very similar in the nature of what one would find when visiting participants' classrooms. One participant said this about his classroom:

There is always a lot of conversation, always a lot of joking and having fun and listening to music, but, there is also a lot of hard work that is going on, and you know it goes back

to me being comfortable with what I know in my teaching and an awareness that I am evolving. (*Andy, interview, April 29, 2016*)

Relationships. All participants expressed the importance of building strong relationships with students. Participants felt that building these relationships with students allows them to be better able to understand and meet the needs of each individual. One participant described it as:

I know my kids and I know where they are at. I can sit down and tell anybody where my kids are at, what their strengths are and what we really need to work on, that kind of thing. (*Jamie, interview, April 30, 2016*)

Small class sizes, multi-year exposure, and close community ties enable teachers in these communities to build strong relationships that are critical to effective teaching and learning.

The best way to interact with students is definitely not biasly [sic], just accepting each one of them the way they are. I think students learn best when they feel cared for, when they feel that they have an adult that is invested in their learning. Sometimes I feel that is the best, what is more important than anything else is the relationship with the student.

The trust that one builds with a student, the ability to increase a student's self-confidence to their best in the classroom. It is all about the learner, it is all about each individual kid that walks through your door. That has always been my belief. Each and every kid is unique and each and every kid learns in a different way. Any kid that fails in my classroom reflects a failure on my own part not to meet their needs. (*River, interview, April 30, 2016*)

Another participant added:

I think because of the rapport and relationships I spend time developing with kids, I can get to the nuts and bolts of where they are and what they need pretty quickly. (*Andy, interview, April 29, 2016*)

Some participants talked about the importance of knowing students so that you can better engage them as learners. Once you have an understanding of their interests, you can provide learning experiences that will engage students to be active learners. Sydney explained:

I think building connections in learning makes the material more engaging. I've observed that students need positive relationships and self-regulation tools to be able to stay active in their learning. (*Sydney, interview, May 4, 2016*)

Many participants discussed how the close relationships they build with students enables them to challenge students. It allows them to engage their students in difficult tasks because of the trust that has been built between the student and teacher. Trust was discussed by many participants and was described by one participant when he stated:

I think that relationships, that knowing kids trust you and knowing that you're doing this because you want them to learn are important. I think that's the most important thing, more than anything else for interactions is that you have to make that relationship and need to make that contact and that starts off everything. (*Tyler, interview, May 2, 2016*)

It was expressed that students understand that teachers have their best interest at heart. This was expressed as, "Once they feel that I am honoring them as a person then they can hear the challenges that I put out for them" (*Cameron, interview, May 1, 2016*). This idea was further expressed by Avery:

As you are creating experiences, learning experiences for students, keeping all of that in mind and those relationships can be called upon when you are asking them to do

something difficult. You can encourage them to use their strengths when you know that it is being called on and recognize when you are challenging them. Being as honest with students as is healthy, is a good way to interact with them as learners. Start with a learning relationship and know them. *(Avery, interview, April 29, 2016)*

Some participants described how they work to build and keep strong relationships with students:

I try to let go of things that are sort of victimless crimes in my classroom. Some of those things are what kids hear all the time: don't wear a hat, don't put up your hood, don't eat in the classroom, don't listen to your I-pod. All those things do is make them less willing to listen to me when I have something really important to say. I just want them to accept the Hippocratic Oath really and just do no harm to their environment or to others. So all the things that do no harm like, all the things that are like misdemeanors that do no harm, I try to let those go, to let them be their own people. Once they feel that I am honoring them as a person then they can hear the challenges that I put out for them. *(Cameron, interview, May 1, 2016)*

This was supported and further explained by Morgan:

I feel that it's very important to be honest with kids. Also to be approachable, to establish a level of comfort with the kids so that they will come to me if there's a problem outside of, you know, [school]. I am able to do that with such a small group or groupings even, that you get to know them better and I just think that's the best way. I mean, sometimes it's best to lie down on the floor with them and put a puzzle together than to solve a math problem or you know, lie around in bean bag chairs and yeah, a more personal approach. *(Morgan, interview, May 3, 2016)*

Some teachers shared concerns that mandates, testing in particular, erode these relationships.

One participant expressed that she feels that:

So it's just sort of like, I feel like I'm almost developing a passive aggressive relationship with them. I think it's kind of making me have this weird relationship with kids where I'd like to challenge kids but I don't like to unrealistically challenge kids. I think it's just sort of like, a waste...I think it starts to erode that because then they don't trust me and it just starts taking away that trust like, 'she's not my cheerleader anymore.' (*Sydney, interview, May 4, 2016*)

A few participants discussed concerns over how mandates could affect their ability to build close bonds with their students. Some expressed concerns that this is what seems to be, or what they have seen in schools with larger student populations and larger class sizes. In many schools, so much emphasis is placed on core subjects that other subjects are being pushed aside or even eliminated. One participant explained that this seems to be starting to happen at his school and how this has affected him by saying:

You know I am amazed that, I used to feel that by the time a kid graduated from this school that I had a really intense personal relationship with them. I don't feel that anymore and I think, in part, [because of the subject areas taught] I spent a lot of time with kids. I am amazed, it is not that I am not working as hard, harder even, but I feel like I am beating my head against the wall. My relationships with kids, because I just don't see them as much, has or seems like it has changed completely. I don't feel like I am as connected to kids anymore. In fact, by the time they leave school, even though I have worked with them for many, many years I feel distant and not so connected. (*Sam, interview, May 5, 2016*)

Location and Community Connections. The three schools included in this study are located in unique, geographically isolated communities. The smallest school has an average student population of 65 and the largest 250. Class sizes range from two to twelve students. All participants talked about their unique locations and the impact their locations have on their relationships with students, parents, and the community. All participants also spoke about location as it relates to mandates, which will be covered in theme two.

Participants were asked if they perceive their relationships to be enhanced by the location of their schools. All participants agreed that they see many benefits to teaching and living in these isolated communities as it relates to relationship building. All participants commented that maybe sometimes teachers know too much about their students but in the end, it just allows them to better connect with their students.

Oh, absolutely! I have seen them, you know, since they were in utero pretty much, you know, coming up along the pike. I know a great deal, way too much information sometimes, about their families and their lives and so it helps me anticipate what their needs are going to be by the time they get to me. If I know that this is a family that travels and enriches their children's lives and takes them places, then I know I have to be ready for further enrichment. If I know that it's a kid that's never been read to and that barely gets fed and is living meal-to-meal kind of thing, then I know what I have to provide for them, also. So, you know, it's kind of, almost TMI, you know? It's just, I think it makes for a better school and better education for the kids because we do know so much about them. I think, you know, I think they're very lucky to have so much attention and to have so many adults that do care and do realize what kind of situation we're dealing with. So, yeah. *(Sydney, interview, May 4, 2016)*

Another participant added detail to this by explaining:

I think it helps a lot. So, yes where I live and work definitely helps to foster relationships with the kids that I reach because they can't avoid me. I am at the grocery store, I am at every event, I hire them to do yard work, we do theater together, I am their waitress sometimes, I make them breakfast sometimes, we all have so many roles in the community that we can't avoid each other. So I know them very, very well. I have had them as students every, every, every year and they have done tons with me and tons of [subject area] classes with me and it is just great. I think that is a really wonderful thing.
(Cameron, interview, May 1, 2016)

One participant compared the ability to build strong relationships with students in small schools to much larger schools. He reflected:

You know a lot about the kids, you know a lot about their families. You see them a lot and you, maybe, I have often wondered if sometimes maybe we know too much about our kids and families. But I do think there is an advantage in that there is a relationship that gets developed even stronger than you could ever have in a large school system where you don't really know your students as well as you do in a small school. *(River, interview, April 30, 2016)*

Some of the potential drawbacks were discussed by a few participants. Many in the form of boundary issues. Boundaries were described in two stories by participants. First, Jamie told a story about crossing boundaries in a positive way through explaining:

When you come home from work and you find a little picture of flowers sitting on your table that one of the kids had just stopped by your house and came in and left you a gift. It creates a whole different environment altogether. When you have dinner with your

kids, I think that is another thing that I do. Even though we are a small community I think sometimes we still get isolated, we still isolate. (*Jamie, interview, April 30, 2016*)

Avery laughed when she talked about students crossing boundaries, but ended the story in a very positive light. She recalled:

Well I have observed sometimes the boundaries between, there are behaviors that become, you know, students feel like they can comment on your personal life more than in a bigger school where they don't see you outside of school. "Oh I saw you yesterday with so and so" and I am like, 'well okay, wow!' So there are some boundary issues but you can very much address that and it is generally a lovely thing that it is so small.

(*Avery, interview, April 29, 2016*)

Some participants talked about the difficulties that can arise in small, isolated communities when a teacher is friends with the parent(s) of a student in their class when a conflict arises. Andy, recalled a difficult time with a parent who is also a friend when he gave the student a grade that prevented the student from being on the honor roll. He commented, "As it stands at the moment I have a parent whose, whose friendship I have valued over the last year and a half who is really upset at me right now" (Andy, interview, April 29, 2016). He stated that this has been a difficult situation for him and hopes that it comes to a resolution. This sentiment was echoed by Sam when he stated, "In terms of my relationships with kids, there are the potential benefits with my relationship with parents. It has at times been very sticky that way, when conflicts arise" (*Sam, interview, May 5, 2016*).

Several participants discussed the positive aspects of community involvement and the educational benefits it provides for students. Participants discussed the ability to reach out to community members to come into their school and help teach units that they are familiar with or

have expertise in. Others discussed the support to plan, organize, and chaperone field trips. One participant told a story about asking a simple question:

I asked the fire chief to come the other day to talk to my kids about all the down trees and the possibility of a forest fire and he said, “Well let’s bring in the forest ranger.” and I said, ‘Yes, great! Let’s bring in the forest ranger.’ He brought the forest ranger in by helicopter. So you know we had a helicopter, forest ranger, fire chief. We had it all for this one little lesson. (*Jamie, interview, April 30, 2016*)

The concluding thoughts on this interview question with this participant summed up what most participants perceived about their unique community locations by saying:

I think that really has a huge impact on us. We can teach, we can really teach.

Oh, yeah, oh yes, oh yeah! And the kids realize that people are watching them at all times and they are being taken care of... We are the community. We are not part of the community, we are the community, we’re it. We are the whole town. (*Jamie, interview, April 30, 2016,*)

Pedagogical Alignment. As expressed in Theme One of this Chapter, participants discussed similar approaches to their philosophies of teaching and learning. Many participants within this study discussed aligning only portions of specific mandates within their classrooms or curriculum. All participants in this study expressed that they do not pay much attention to mandates. This sentiment was expressed time and time again by participants with statements such as, “I ignore what I have to ignore so I have the time to do what’s important for the students.” (*Sydney, interview, May 4, 2016*) and, “You know, I don’t (pay attention to mandates). I pretty much spend all my time focused on teaching and how I am going to teach and how I am

going to connect to kids” (*Sam, interview, May 5, 2016*). River summed up this subtheme by staying:

Yeah, I have seen so many mandates come down the pipe from feds to state level to teachers in the trenches and they are so short lived. One of the things I find is that when we look at mandates, mandates tend to create a lot of busy work and the busy work sometimes has no bearing on what goes on in the classroom or how a big school versus a small school implements that and the impact that it has on a large school versus a smaller school. Jumping through the hoops is that many times you put a lot of work in. Case in point, a tremendous amount of work went into schools developing local assessments that were never used by the state or by anybody. It created a lot of stress, it created a lot of turmoil, and that is what I am talking about with jumping through the hoops. (*River, interview, April 30, 2016*)

Tyler added:

I understand the purpose behind a standardized test, it just puts me at odds with so many things that I think are important with education. It puts me at odds with myself and it puts me at odds with the student and it just doesn’t feel like a place that I want to be. (*Tyler, interview, May 2, 2016*)

Sydney reported that:

I have been told to change grades on student progress reports that reflect testing, rather than what I see in the classroom on a daily basis and what students are showing on end-of-unit assessments. I do not feel this accurately reflects what the student is capable of. An eight-minute test is not a good assessment on what a student knows and can do. (*Sydney, interview, May 4, 2016*)

Of further interest to this study is that teachers expressed that they “cherry pick” from workshops and teaching styles, but this also extends to mandates. Many participants expressed that they like having a set of standards, such as those prescribed by proficiency based learning, however, some said they liked the idea of analytic rubrics while others said they don’t understand how they will work and expressed concern that they would not be accepted by parents.

With the proficiency stuff, it feels so redundant to me because we already have standards-aligned curriculum. I understand there are differences in the aggregation of grades that is interesting to me, but I don’t think that we are going to implement it consistently. I have some very strong doubts that the community will accept a thorough implementation of disaggregation of grades because it is so different than what we are used to. So we will see. (*Cameron, interview, May 1, 2016*)

Research recognizes that a teacher’s classroom practices are influenced by their beliefs and knowledge (Borko & Putnam, 1996). These beliefs and knowledge are a result of their experiences, both as student and teacher, and provide the lens through which they view their practices. Studies have shown that teachers will alter initiatives or new practices so that the changes fit more closely with their own existing beliefs (Eisenhart, Cuthbert, Schrum, & Harding, 1988).

Summary of Theme One: Pedagogy, Relationships, Location, and Alignment. Every participant included in this study discussed the need to build and maintain strong relationships with their students in order to better understand each individual students’ strengths, challenges, and interests. Through this understanding, teachers can plan and implement curriculum based on

those needs in order to move each student as far on the learning continuum as their potential permits.

Participants talked about adjusting their teaching to best benefit the individual needs of each student. All participants expressed their unique philosophy about teaching and learning. Even though many participants attached different labels to their teaching pedagogy, they all had similar explanations about how to best educate their students. These elements included experiential, place-based, hands-on learning experiences, which are at the heart of their beliefs of teaching and learning.

Each and every participant expressed the perception that the unique locations they live and teach in enhance their ability to build and maintain close relationships with students. The intimate setting is not without its drawbacks and limitations, however, all participants felt the benefits overwhelmingly outweigh the drawbacks and limitations. One participant summed this up by saying:

You know, I am here by choice and I would then say that I have always thought that it is beneficial. In terms of my relationships with kids, the potential benefits with my relationship with parents. It has at times been very sticky that way, when conflicts arise. But, no, I think I am here because of very particular reasons. I believe that this school and that small schools can provide kids with superior educational experiences and life experiences and I wouldn't want it to be any other way for my kids. (*Sam, interview, May 5, 2016*)

Theme Two: The General Process of Implementing Mandates

This theme discusses the nuts and bolts of how mandates are or are not implemented in the three schools as perceived by the study participants. Each of the three schools implements

mandates in a slightly different way. Leadership at the local and state levels emerged as a sub-theme of how mandates are implemented, which mandates are implemented, and the follow-up process of implementation.

The Process. Participants in this study all stated that mandates implementation comes from their administration. Participants said they perceive it is the choice of the administration as to which mandates are implemented and how they are implemented in each school. One school's study participants indicated that their school really does not follow mandates and implements very few, if any. Jamie illustrated this by answering the interview question about how her school implements mandates by saying:

They don't. Truly they don't. We go around the block too many times about trying to figure out what the mandate means, and how we are going to get that to happen and it just keeps getting pushed further and further to the background. Even with the teacher evaluation process, we spent two years in committee trying to figure out what we were going to do with that and it finally disbanded because people gave up. We were too frustrated and we gave up. (*Jamie, interview, April 30, 2016*)

A participant from another one of the schools explained what she perceives about how her school implements mandates as:

Well, my understanding, and this might be off base, is that we have what is called a priority team that is set up to address, that is, it is essentially there to address our status as like a priority school. But, part of that process is also to make sure that we are implementing these mandates, such as proficiency-based standards. That also seems to come from our superintendent when we have staff meetings. (*Avery, interview, April 29, 2016*)

This sentiment was further illustrated by another participant who admitted:

Well, this may sound really ignorant, but I'm not really sure how my school implements mandates because there never really seems to be a concrete plan. We hear about them, I think simply because administration has thought about it on her own and maybe listened to some webinars, discussed them with her leadership team, and perhaps even mentioned mandates at staff meetings. I feel like that's all this administration feels it takes to administer mandates. *(Sydney, interview, May 4, 2016)*

Finally, Andy said mandate implementation comes from the administrative level at his school.

He explained:

Well, the information about mandates comes from or through the superintendent to the principal and they are the ones who initiate the conversations and try to, oh, get everybody on the same page, to have the same foundational information, the same operational understanding, and then to begin to do the work to meet the needs of the mandate. *(Andy, interview, April 29, 2016)*

There appeared to be a lack of consensus among participants from individual schools about how mandates are implemented. Some participants expressed frustration over how mandates are implemented and the follow through process to ensure that all teachers were consistently following the mandates. This was expressed by one participant as:

Sometimes I feel like it is completely unnecessary work. Especially when there is no follow through. Like the [program] thing really frosts me because I did a lot of work and then nothing happened. We spent a lot of PD time learning [the program] and we spent a lot of time choosing [the program]. And still nobody did it. I spent a lot of my [off time] sitting with people and holding their hand to enter things into [the program] unwillingly

and no one has finished using it and we are going to get a new platform next year, theoretically to do proficiency work. Administration never cracked down, they sort of tried, but there was no consequence for not doing it and there was no follow through. People claimed that they didn't know there was coverage available so the communication around it was very inconsistent... It totally failed as an administrative mandate because no one did it and there were no repercussions for not doing it. So people who did not like it just continued to not do it, it was very mysterious. *(Cameron, interview, May 1, 2016)*

This was further expressed and illustrated by another participant:

I'm not quite sure the staff is in that position collectively. I think there are pockets that certainly are; there are pockets that say they are but aren't; and there are individuals who are much further ahead, and other individuals who I imagine are waiting for this to change. *(Andy, interview, April 29, 2016)*

One participant has a slightly different take on the implementation of mandates. She expressed a need to follow some mandates as they give common ground for teachers to work from. She stated that since her school does not implement mandates:

I think it leaves me more isolated when we aren't following mandates and it isn't necessarily the mandates or guiding principles. I feel I am far more isolated in that we don't have the cooperative teamwork that we could have if we all knew what the common goal was. That was sort of the gift of the mandate, or gift of the Magi, whatever. The gift of the mandate only because it sort of dictated what we were doing and I can make that work. I can make that work,... I can take a mandate and make it work. I think that maybe part of the issue too is that the pendulum keeps swinging, mandates keep coming down the pike, they are not funded so people are just like, "Euh, I don't really

need to do that.” I vacillate between really embracing the fact that we are out here in the wild, wild west and feeling a little almost jealous of guidelines that people have. Not that I want to embrace every single stinking guideline that is out there but at least there is some kind of understanding of where you are going as an organization. But, in a smaller community we are far more independent and so I think we become stubborn [sic] and trying to please the great emperor doesn’t mean much. (*Jamie, interview, April 30, 2016*)

Perceptions of Workloads. Staffing in the three K-12 schools included in this study are very limited. The impact of the workload to implement mandates is spread among very few individuals in small schools as opposed to larger schools where the workloads are dispersed across several staff members. Participants were asked to reflect on the impact of these workloads on them and their classrooms. Participants overwhelmingly perceive their workloads to be negatively affected by implementation of mandates. Many participants also felt that teaching multi-age classrooms further compounds this workload because they are implementing them at more than one grade level.

I would say that it is a staff-wide process with roughly fifteen people, which means we all have to wear a lot of hats on top of teaching in a classroom, multiple subjects at multiple grade levels, so it overwhelms us. (*Morgan, interview, May 3, 2016*)

This was supported by another participant:

I think just being [location] and being in a small community and teaching several grade spans at once we do double our work load and then to differentiate between the high and the low, it is a tremendous, it is a tremendous workload. I think that can affect people very negatively. (*Jamie, interview, April 30, 2016*)

Another participant expressed frustration by emphatically stating:

That is what I do, I teach content and I manage my classroom. Like, that is when I am being my best self, when I am teaching because I am a teacher, not an implementer of mandates. (*Cameron, interview, May 1, 2016*)

However, one participant somewhat contradicted this perception by saying:

As rural teachers sometimes we do more than people in larger schools who may have Ed Techs do some of the grading and filing and copying and that kind of thing and the kind of administrative stuff. On the other hand, we have fewer students to prepare for, so I think it might even out at the end of the day. (*Avery, interview, April 29, 2016*)

Professional Development. Professional development is a key component of continuing education for teachers. Participants included in this study all agreed that strong professional development is critical in all schools, but even more so for teachers who work and live in isolated communities. This connection to the outside world of education helps teachers feel connected and keeps them up to date. Teachers are often the ones who implement state and federal initiatives, typically without appropriate professional development to support them (Cho & Eberhard, 2013).

In-House Professional Development. All participants expressed that the implementation of mandates, particularly the move to proficiency-based learning systems, has been the main focus of in-house, staff-wide professional development, to the exclusion of other important issues. Concerns were raised about mandates overtaking professional development and many shared the sentiment that, “the professional development about fulfilling mandates is completely uninteresting to me” (*Cameron, interview, May 1, 2016*). This was expressed by another participant in these words:

It has totally taken over the notion of a full staff meeting. It has taken over our ability to sit and talk about issues that are important to the day-in and day-out structures of making this school work and making this school work well. It is always this pressure of having to attend to this state mandate and we have to attend to this state mandate, and to this one (pounded on the table) – and again I don't know where this pressure comes from or what would happen if we didn't attend to a state mandate. So it seems to have just taken over the agenda. It just gets talked about and I don't even know what is being talked about anymore. *(Sam, interview, May 5, 2016)*

Another participant added this concern:

I mean again, the professional development that we've done here, because the majority of it has been proficiency-based learning, there hasn't been any. We really haven't had professional development. We really haven't done anything. And professional development is difficult in a small setting like this. In a K-12, what would be appropriate for your kids wouldn't be appropriate for mine and what would be appropriate for someone in the high school. So it's really hard to narrow that down and something that I've always struggled with is how do you do that? How do you do professional development that's relevant for everyone at every single grade-level? It's been something that is hard to take from classroom to classroom. *(Tyler, interview, May 2, 2016)*

Another concern that was raised regarding to in-house professional development was the time between work sessions. It was explained as:

Sometimes when they leave, I'm left with more questions than when I started. Sometimes I think I have a good handle on what I need to do and where I need to go with this, and then the time in between the professional development gets long, and those ideas and

thoughts get lost maybe because there's too much time in between sessions and we don't have a good chunk of time to just sit down and do what needs to be done. (*Morgan, interview, May 3, 2016*)

All participants in this study are the only teacher at their grade level and teach in multi-age classrooms or are the sole teacher of a subject area that is taught across all grade levels. Many participants discussed the difficulty of staff-wide professional development fitting the needs of all teachers. It was illustrated by one participant as:

I am a big advocate for strong professional development. This has been a challenge to get in a K-12 school, to get good strong professional development. I think it is extremely challenging when we teach several grade levels at once, and we are the only ones. So, to have good strong professional development, I think we need to be far more collaborative with other schools and it hasn't happened, it just hasn't happened. That is a frustrating piece for me personally. I just feel like we need to be doing so much more professionally and we are so isolated, even within our own school, within our own grade level that what makes sense for professional development for me isn't necessarily going to make sense for the person teaching 6th grade, or even the person teaching K-1. We are all in very unique developmental areas in our schools, I mean in our element. So I think that has a very negative impact on what we can do for professional development. (*Jamie, interview, April 30, 2016*)

Off-Site Professional Development. All participants find off-site professional development to be most beneficial as long as teachers are selective and purposeful about what they are getting development in. Overall, participants were positive about off-site professional

development. One of the benefits of off-site professional development discussed was the ability to interact with teachers at your own grade level from other schools. It was described as:

I think that it's a benefit to receive professional development if anything for the contact with other teachers at other schools. The challenges of professional development are that there are so many choices available, like, where do I even start? And how do I access professional development from our isolated location? Professional development provides the opportunity for me to critically analyze my practice and to keep up with others at my grade level. *(Sydney, interview, May 4, 2016)*

Some participants have taken courses as part of their professional development plans. All participants who discussed this agreed that there were a lot of benefits to professional development, which was spoken of by Tyler:

I have taken some classes...I got a lot out of it, a lot of ideas and I think that what I get out of professional development in general when we go to conferences or do any of these things, what can I take back, what little thing can I take back? I never take a grand idea and put it into play because grand ideas are kind of in there already but little things, little changes I can make throughout the year, that's what I take back and what I've been able to use. So I've taken that from conferences we've done and classes I've taken so, yeah, that's definitely been a benefit. *(Tyler, interview, May 2, 2016)*

Off-site professional development as a critical component for teachers in isolated communities was illustrated as such:

I think one of the difficulties is that people wear so many different hats that it is hard to get the professional development that you need. I find a lot of times that because you are the only science teacher or social studies teacher or the only elementary teacher that you

are able to take advantage of some really good professional development opportunities off [site] that school systems make available to you. (*River, interview, April 30, 2016*)

Many participants talked about the challenges of off-site professional development due to travel restrictions or difficulties. Some participants also talked about a lack of availability of substitute teachers, which makes taking time away from school for professional develop far more difficult.

This concern was raised as:

It is really hard to commit to signing up for professional development when you may not have coverage for the day. That sometimes means having a revolving door of staff coverage with no consistent person for the day. Due to having to travel from here, you may have to go the day before or stay the night after which means more time away from school and potentially more time not covered by a consistent person in your classroom.

That is really difficult for my students, especially those with needs. (*Sydney, interview, May 4, 2016*)

A concern raised by one participant was the difficulty he has with walking out the door to get professional development. He stated:

Years ago, it just might be a sensation, but it seemed like a lot easier to take time off and go do professional development and I took advantage of that. I visited schools and I made connections with other teachers and it seems like it was easy to just walk out the door.

Again, I am not entirely sure why, (long pause) I just can't walk out the door. (*Sam, interview, May 5, 2016*)

Leadership. Leadership plays a critical role in every organization and schools are no exception. Leadership emerged as a sub-theme that related to the implementation and importance of mandates. Leadership concerns were raised by all participants included in this study.

School Leadership. All three schools not only have small staff sizes but also small administrative offices. Each school is a single school district with one Superintendent and one Principal in each school. Each of these three schools have had changes in their leadership positions over the past several years. Participants all explained that mandates' implementation comes from a top down structure with little input from staff. Participants from one of the three schools stated that their school pays little to no attention to mandates and implements very few. However, they both agreed about the new Superintendent at their school:

Coming into this small school system, sometimes I think mandates don't affect our isolated [location] schools as much as they affect bigger schools, depending on who you have at the helm. We have a great superintendent out here now that has made it really clear that the experience of the student is number one. (*River, interview, April 30, 2016*)

Another participant added to this by also discussing former administration and had this to say:

We are in an interesting transition between leadership where previous leadership really couldn't make up their mind and wanted to explore all possibilities and now we have leadership that is just like, "Pick one and go with it." I think it is the nature of the beast. I don't think it was necessarily philosophical on purpose. I think it was more or less the inability to get clarity on the path in which we need to go and to get the professional development to get us there. (*Jamie, interview, April 30, 2016*)

Participants in the other schools also discussed changes in their leadership and the differences in the styles of leadership. There appears to be lack of cohesion with the understanding of goals and importance of mandates. This was illustrated through this comment:

The former administration, before the current principal, didn't care about mandates and therefore that may have been a better approach instead of the current approach where we

are pretending to implement mandates. We receive very little feedback here in our isolated environment and at this rate if administration actually did provide feedback, I'd be suspect because I lack confidence that the principal has the best interest of students in mind. The current administration seems to be more concerned about appearances than substance. It's kind of hard though because it's confusing and we don't know what's really important and where our current leadership is taking us. It's kind of, it's unsettling, it's very unsettling for me. *(Sydney, interview, May 4, 2016)*

This concern was shared by another participant when she stated:

But I know that there's a lot more test anxiety for staff than there probably used to be. I think the administration now puts more of a focus on data than there has been in the past. So, yeah, I don't know about changes but those would be the changes: increased teacher anxiety and trying to implement the RTI programs. *(Morgan, interview, May 3, 2016)*

Further information was added to this theme by another participant who said:

We're being trained by someone who we don't necessarily respect or don't necessarily agree with or whatever, everything is kind of skewed and you don't take it as seriously as you might normally take it. That's one thing, is people don't seem to be afraid to bring it up at staff meetings, I mean more than one time. I know that one of the exercises we were supposed to do we had a staff member say, "did you see this thing that just came out?" and it kind of de-bunks everything we're doing right now. It was ignored, but at least it was brought to everyone's attention that this is the case. *(Tyler, interview, May 2, 2016)*

Yet another concern was raised:

I think that this implementing and aligning mandates, I think it's a total waste of time. It's simply to inform the uninformed teacher about what's in the standards. It allows for

individuals to not take responsibility for their own profession. We waste so much time doing this that we ignore the implementation of the actual teaching and fail to encourage the upgrade of teaching practice in the building at great cost to student learning. So that's pretty much, "Hey we're gonna spend all this time on paper work," but the actual reality of it is never discussed, implemented, or followed through. (*Sydney, interview, May 4, 2016*)

An additional concern brought up by several participants was that of trust in leadership. Bennis and Nanus (2007) remind us that, "trust is the lubrication that makes it possible for organizations to work... Trust implies accountability, predictability, reliability" (p. 41). One participant described it like this:

And on top of that there all sorts of inter-personal difficulties, so if we're being trained by someone who we don't necessarily respect or don't necessarily agree with or whatever, everything is kind of skewed and you don't take it as seriously as you might normally take it. (*Tyler, interview, May 2, 2016*)

These concerns were discussed by most participants included in this study. Another concern shared by these participants is the fact that their schools will yet again have new people stepping into administrative roles in the coming school year. There was some level of apprehension about what these people will bring and their perceptions of the importance of mandates.

State Level Leadership. Many participants expressed concern at the state level with why so many mandates are being thrust upon school systems. These participants expressed confusion and concern about how this has evolved over time and what it means for current mandates. There was also frustration raised over information coming out of the state as one participant pointed out

that from what he can tell, the DOE website on proficiency-based learning hasn't been updated in about two years. (Paraphrased, *River*, interview, April 30, 2016) He also stated, "It is really clear that no one at the State has a clue which way this is going. So that is my philosophy on, informed and proactive is staying away from it" (*River*, interview, April 30, 2016).

Another participant has this to say:

I think for years in the first part of my teaching career, the state mandates they always seemed to be more suggestions or guidance. They didn't seem to carry this weight on top of them that penalties could be instilled or funding could be taken away or this kind of thing. It seems that over time that both, I'm not sure if it is that state government or the federal government who wheedles the power, but that pressure has increased over time. That is my perception. Although I am really not sure necessarily who is out there right now, I don't know, I really don't know who is pushing the buttons. There seems to be over time with departments of education, inside of states, have not just double or tripled or quadrupled. There are a lot of people who have jobs and want to keep their jobs and they are going to produce mandates, they are going to do their jobs. If you tell them to write mandates, then they are going to do that and send them down to the local structure. At this point for me, those things come at us at such a regular occurrence that I don't even pay attention anymore. (*Sam*, interview, May 5, 2016)

This sentiment was shared by Morgan, who stated:

I feel like there's too much government involvement. When we had, I mean, years ago, the state of Maine came out with the Maine Learning Results and I think those were more to act as a guide than to say 'you have to do these' but with the No Child Left Behind, which was the first big one I think really that I've paid attention to, it seems like the goal

was to get all kids on a level playing field, but I really do feel like it still leaves kids behind.

This was shared by another participant who stated:

I am certainly not a Governor LePage [fan] by any means but there was one good thing he said when he first took office in his first term. He said, 'I'd like to cut the Department of Education off by its knees.' I was thinking about that and said, 'You know, so would I.' Because what do they do other than create work? I mean what do they actually do to increase accountability or with teacher-to-student relationship? I've never had any connection at all between their function. I realize that, it is like, you know the boss screams at the guy, the guy screams at his wife, the wife screams at the kid, and the kid kicks the dog; the dogs are definitely the teachers because, well the feds are trying to keep their jobs and they are passing it down to the state level and they are trying to keep their jobs. They keep fabricating these mandates that have little, little connection at all to what is actually happening in the trenches. That has always been my biggest concern.

(River, interview, April 30, 2016)

Summary of Theme Two: The Process of Implementing Mandates. This theme began with the nuts and bolts of how the three schools included in this study implement mandates. All three schools follow a top down organizational approach to mandate implementation. Administration makes the decision about which mandates will be implemented and how the process will be undertaken.

With significant changes in leadership in all three schools, there seems to be some level of mistrust of the process of how mandates are being implemented, what the goals of the mandates are, and why mandates are being followed. There is significant concern from

participants that implementation of mandates has overtaken both professional development and staff meetings to the exclusion of other important discussions. Many participants raised concerns about ineffective on-site or in-house professional development. Most said off-site professional development is valuable as long as it is purposeful. Challenges of travel and class coverage were raised as obstacles to receiving off-site professional development.

Theme Three: Discussions of Implementing Specific Mandates

In the past few decades the number of mandates have significantly increased. Some of these mandates were discussed by participants as being in the forefront of their in-house professional development. Mandates discussed by participants included proficiency-based learning systems, Response to Intervention (RtI), and teacher evaluation systems.

Proficiency-Based Learning Systems. Many participants said they believe in some of the components of the proficiency-based learning system, such as having a set of standards to follow. Some participants said this is not unlike using the MLR standards, some of which were replaced with the Common Core (Math and English Language Arts) or the Next Generation Science Standards. Some participants expressed their excitement over having analytic rubrics to help them communicate student learning in a consistent way. Others expressed confusion over the process and lack of consistency and understanding of the goals. One participant explained his understanding of implementation of their proficiency-based learning system as:

Our superintendent's initial impression of proficiency-based was that it could be whatever we wanted it to be and we had a meeting with the DOE and DOE said no that is not really the case, there has to be a level of rigor and if you send something to us that doesn't meet that level of rigor then we will send it back to you. And in that meeting they pointed out that of the 170 some odd school units in the State, only one was close to

being approved. Which gave our superintendent a great deal of pause and he began to rethink his approach and how, what was needed to get the staff in a position to do this work. *(Andy, interview, April 29, 2016)*

Another concern was raised by Jamie who said:

I took a look at the Common Core, well I have taken the Common Core, and I have tried to really implement it into the classroom and make it work for me. I felt like I was spending a tremendous amount of time doing something that may not be carried forward or it didn't really matter. *(Jamie, interview, April 30, 2016)*

One participant expressed extreme frustration by admitting:

I don't know, I really don't understand what kind of teacher I would need to be or how my classroom would have to function to actually implement proficiency-based learning. Not a clue, don't know, I don't know. So, there you go. *(Sam, interview, May 5, 2016)*

Further frustration was expressed by yet another participant by saying:

Aside from that we've started the process of proficiency-based learning, which is a little confusing to say the least, the whole process involved with that. I have to wonder if different school districts have more staff to do some of this work because I feel like we're being rushed and no one completely understands what's going on and in the meanwhile, all the people at the top are saying "We're gonna do it, we're not gonna do it, we're gonna move it back, no we're not gonna do it that way." and it's just really confusing us as to why we're putting so much effort into something that really feels like it's maybe going away. So that's how we're implementing it that I've seen, anyways. *(Tyler, interview, May 2, 2016)*

Response to Intervention. Participants who discussed RtI said they believe in the intention of this mandate. Some said their school already had an RtI system in place but less formally than is now required. Concerns were raised as to whether or not the mandate was being properly implemented. In regards to RtI, one study participant said:

RtI does make a lot of sense to me and I feel like where we can intervene is really important and early intervention is really important and again it did create a position for me to interact with elementary readers, but I don't think the implementation of it is quite right, the way that we are doing it. It does align with my beliefs. I definitely think that for some kid's identification with a specific learning difference is vital, because they have a specific learning difference that is not going to be compensated for with extra study.

(Cameron, interview, May 1, 2016)

Morgan expressed similar concerns by saying:

I think at this school we've always had a response to intervention, but it just wasn't mandated. I don't know if it's always followed the way it should be, if it's set up the way the program was intended because we don't have the staff and we don't have an RtI coordinator, or necessarily even a reading specialist on staff that would be necessary I think to really fully implement that type of program. *(Morgan, interview, May 3, 2016)*

Teacher Evaluation Systems. A particularly frustrating mandate that was discussed by participants was the requirement for schools to adopt a Teacher Evaluation System. One participant talked about the difficulty her staff had in coming up with a system while others expressed concerns with testing being tied to their evaluations. These systems have not yet been implemented in any of the schools included in this study, however, they are slated to be started in the 2016/2017 school year. It appears that there is apprehension about whether or not this

mandate will be postponed yet again, or how it will be implemented and followed up on. Tyler summed up the overall concerns about this mandate by saying:

It's something that, especially when we start talking about being evaluated on how kids are testing, I think we're really reaching dangerous grounds at that point. I think you're really reaching a place where now you're talking about my livelihood and how I feed my family and whether or not I'm going to get fired and whether I'm going to be able to find a job somewhere else because I'm part of a failing school, and who in the world is going to teach the kids that have difficulty taking tests? Because it's a gamble to put yourself in that position and I just, you know, it feels like it's just a really dangerous position for you to be in, for you to be evaluated on that kind of, you know, something like that where there's so many outside influences that affect what a kid goes into. So yeah, it just always made me nervous and that's why when I hear about places and times when it wasn't that way it must have been a magical land! *(Tyler, interview, May 2, 2016)*

These concerns were shared by all participants and were further expanded with concerns about the validity of the MEA itself as a testing tool. In prior years the MEA was used by the State to grade schools with funding being potentially tied to the grade. Failing schools were threatened with reduced funding and public humiliation within their community and the professional community. The sole assessment tool used to grade schools was the MEA.

The MEA, it's a complete crapshoot right now. They are saying it is going to be used for accountability next year, but, you need at least three years of data collection to create a norm reference, without a norm reference, your data is not reliable and valid, and yet people are going to be held accountable to it and this year's test was a disaster. Are we

ever going to have a test we can actually use the data from? (*Andy, interview, April 29, 2016*)

A few participants discussed the impact that the publication of test results potentially has on their community standing and classroom curriculum. This concern was summarized by Sydney:

It confirms to some parents who don't like the math program that we should switch, you know, because the progress monitoring tool that we're using isn't, well, it probably is aligned with the Common Core, but because the Common Core is pushing ahead you know, our program doesn't quite keep up with what the common core is asking. So you know, there are parents that don't like the math program, so when their kids do poorly on this instrument that is aligned with something, who knows what, but doesn't really show our kids math learning, then parents go, "oh see, your math program sucks." or "You suck as a teacher." or some kids go home and ask their parents to help triage our math program – "I saw all this stuff on the test I didn't know!" so parents get all panicked and are try to teach their kids math because they don't trust that I'm doing what I'm supposed to be doing. (*Sydney, interview, May 4, 2016*)

High-Stakes Tests. High-stakes tests are defined as tests that are used to make important decisions for students (such as placement, retention, graduation, and college admission), teachers (such as probation, bonuses, and employment) and schools (funding and student enrollment). High-stakes tests are commonly used for the purpose of accountability to ensure that students are making adequate progress and are being taught by effective teachers. For the purpose of this study, high-stakes tests are the MEA and the Smarter Balance Test. The MEA is the test that has

been given by the State on an annual basis for more than twenty years. One participant described this test by saying:

I'm pretty sure that the MEA has been a different test for sixteen of those twenty years. And we are holding people accountable for a test that has never been norm referenced, which completely invalidates it and makes the data completely useless. With all of the glitches in this year's MEA test I would not be surprised if the state throws it out. (*Andy, interview, April 29, 2016*)

Every teacher in this study stated that they do not like the MEA and do not find the data from test applicable to their curriculum or daily operations of their classrooms. They also all stated that they do not feel that this is an accurate measure of their students. A student reflection read by Sydney reflected:

Even though the test was easy, I don't want my whole life based off test scores. I really didn't like it, it was horrible. Instead of being judged by my test I want to be judged by my portfolio.

Concerns raised by participants regarding the MEA surrounded the type and level of questions that are being asked on the test. One participant said he feels that, "...the questions in the practice test this year were testing whether or not kids could exceed the standard." (*Andy, interview, April 29, 2016*) This concern was shared as:

I think that my job is to truly help the students and by helping the student I am showing what they do know and what they can do but it almost seems like the testing is to show what they can't do, you know? It's just sort of like, it just seems like, "oh yeah we wanna show what students can do." but I don't know, the testing sort of just leaves this bad taste in my mouth of what they can't do. (*Sydney, interview, May 4, 2016*)

Concerns about the amount of time these tests take and the impact that it has on curriculum was also raised by many of the study participants.

Low-Stakes Testing. There was not consensus among participants about the benefits of low-stakes testing. Low-stakes tests are part of the RtI mandate which provides for student progress monitoring. These tests are also used to show student growth over time. Participants mentioned tests like NWEA, Aimsweb, and Dibels as low-stakes tests. Some participants find value in these tests and use them with students as illustrated by:

I like the kind of testing I want to do, like the NWEA. I like that one, my kids take that and I love it and because I love it and I use the information and I share it with my kids and I get them really involved with it, they too love it. They look forward to taking the test and we get really excited and I don't even have to tell them what their scores are, they know from the beginning of the year to the end of the year and they will say, "I've grown thirty points." And they have made incredible growth and it is because they are engaged and enthusiastic about it. When I look at the NWEA, that kind of testing is fantastic. That gives me really specific information so I can change my teaching within ten minutes if I say, "Well okay I see you are not getting this concept so I need to go back and I need to re-teach that concept until it is solid." That doesn't happen with the regular standardized test. Something like the NWEA, that gives me that information, it gives me the tools that I need and I think it is fantastic (*Jamie, interview, April 30, 2016*)

Other teachers called this type of praise "incentivizing" because of the way they present data from these tests to students. One participant explained:

We have incentivized it a little bit, I don't know if [another participant] talked to you a little bit about how we have kind of done the little age appropriate incentivizing with like,

“Yay! You grew!” I think phrasing it that way makes it somewhat engaging for them and adds buy in and doesn’t say, “Oh you are terrible!” it just shows positive. (*Avery, interview, April 29, 2016*)

Another explained the reliability, validity, and usefulness of the NWEA test as being:

I use data all the time, first thing I did when I came in was I gathered all of the NWEA scores and I went through and looked and I got a good snapshot, but data, like everything else, I love data, but data doesn’t drive anything I do. It informs what I do but it doesn’t drive what I do. So, I have talked about the NWEA and I don’t know if they have transferred this information from one test to the other but I have talked about how the NWEA is valid and reliable because it has been around for twenty years, it’s been the same test for twenty years. They have all this data they have collected, and they know what the answer to this question indicates about you as a student and it is important to us because this is the information that gives us the information that says I can be very clear about this because I have looked at all the data. (*Andy, interview, April 29, 2016*)

Two participants expressed concerns about the use of these types of progress monitoring tests and how they are being used in their school. One participant stated:

So I give them these tests and I get interactions after every time we do this you know, I feel like it’s a poisonous practice, and then I hear “[teacher name], what’s this box even mean!?” and we haven’t even gotten to long division! So you know, this is when they’re starting to ask and they get freaked out when they don’t know anything on the test, like, “why aren’t we learning this stuff!?” This is what the kids are asking me you know? (*Sydney, interview, May 4, 2016*)

Another raised concerns about what is being tested with the Dibels testing saying:

I am an RtI teacher and I don't necessarily know what best practices are and I don't necessarily know how to assess the data and I don't necessarily know if what is being tested is the appropriate thing to be testing. We have these poor kids doing a one-minute timed oral fluency test, and that is it. There is nothing, well so when I work with kids in RtI is it to get kids to just read faster and more accurately. And as far as I understand I am just supposed to get this kid to read faster. Then they are reading faster but there is no way to test their application of punctuation and expression which is totally getting lost. (Cameron, interview, May 1, 2016)

Emotional Impact on Teachers. Mandates have an impact on teachers' classrooms through the amount of time testing takes away from working with students, working with RtI programming, and aligning curriculum and grading to a proficiency-based system. Participants described feelings of frustration, anxiety, and heartbreak when administering high-stakes tests. One participant described, "I feel for them in those moments because I feel like I am torturing them and so I am a little bit softer on them on those days than I would be normally" (Avery, interview, April 29, 2016). The following are participant reflections related to the impact mandates have had on them:

- Well, before all of these when I taught.... teaching was fun and they've kind of taken the fun out of teaching. I mean, they do force me to explore areas that I might not on my own just because they don't particularly interest me, but they do cause some stress when I'm planning anything. Am I meeting all the standards that I need to be meeting? And they don't leave a lot of wiggle room for teaching just the important things of kindness and those sorts of things. (Morgan, interview, May 3, 2016)

- I think the teachers obviously end up feeling very differently than the mandates being handed to us and becoming almost rebellious to advocate for our students. I believe that it makes me a better teacher in the sense that I will advocate for my kids and I have become more passionate about it. And if I were to simply follow mandates I would be very disengaged and I would be teaching, well I wouldn't be teaching, I would just be following the teacher's edition of 'now we are on page 36 and we are learning this.' I try to be aware of the mandates. They can frustrate me, they can anger me, and they can make me become a better teacher because I will push harder to educate the kids in the way that I think they should be educated. (*Jamie, interview, April 30, 2016*)

- I can only teach the way that I teach, and I think as soon as I start teaching "this is how we take a test," I stop being a teacher and I start being some kind of, I don't know, I don't know what you become at that point, a robot or something. That isn't really doing our job and isn't giving any credit to the position that we're doing. The trust that people have put in us is that kids leave here knowing something besides just what's in that book.

Because if that's what they need to know then why not just give them that book and leave them at home? You know? If that's what the goal is, that they know what's on this test, give them a page to look at, read it over, learn it back and forth and take your test and go home because I'm not teaching anymore. (*Tyler, interview, May 2, 2016*)

- I am not going to jump through these hoops. I guess I am somewhat of a rebel when it comes to that. I find most of the stuff that the state and federal level mandate is just bullshit. I try not to stay informed or proactive with any of it (mandates) to be perfectly honest with you. (*River, interview, April 30, 2016*)

- I think sometimes, yeah, it makes me feel devalued. Like, I'm not intelligent enough to make good decisions on what my students need from me. So yeah, I would say it takes away from the personal aspect of teaching. (*Morgan, interview, May 3, 2016*)

Summary Theme Three: Discussions of Implementing Specific Mandates.

Participants discussed the mandates that are dominating the attention of their schools this year. Proficiency-based learning systems, RtI, teacher evaluation systems, and testing were the ones discussed most often. Participants reported they believe in specific components of each of the mandates but talked about how certain parts align with their beliefs about teaching and learning while others do not. The pieces they believe in are the ones they are most likely to take into their classrooms and use.

None of the participants included in this study agreed with the MEA testing. There was a significant amount of concern raised about how the test scores do not accurately reflect their students' learning or their own ability to teach. How the scores are being used by the state to grade schools and teachers was of great concern with the pending adoption of new Teacher Evaluation Systems, which include a testing component as part of a teacher's evaluation.

There were mixed perceptions about the effectiveness of low-stakes testing among the participants. Some feel the NWEA and other in-house testing is valuable for showing student growth over time and the information can be used immediately to adjust curriculum based on student needs. Other participants feel the information is not the right information to be testing which brought up concerns about curriculum alignment. There was also concern about how this information is being reported to parents.

Finally, the emotional impacts on teachers of mandate implementation were highlighted. When mandates do not align with a teacher's beliefs about teaching and learning, it has a

significant impact on teachers. Participants mentioned feelings of frustration, anxiety, and heartbreak when having to administer high-stakes tests.

Theme Four: Perceptions of Student Understanding and Emotional Impacts of High-Stakes Testing

This theme includes teacher perceptions of their students' understanding of mandates, such as high-stakes testing, on them, their teachers, and their school. This theme discusses the emotional impact these mandates have on their students based on their observations. It also looks at potential carry-over of emotional impacts into other test settings and the general classroom environment.

Perceptions of Student Understanding of High-Stakes Testing. Participants included in this study overwhelmingly stated their perceptions that students do not understand the goals of high-stakes testing. Many participants said that they think students lack the cognitive development to understand what is at stake for them, their teachers, and their school.

I don't think kids grades 2 – 8 have a clue, maybe in middle school they sort of start to understand. Your fourth grader, they just don't have that kind of metacognition. They just don't have that developed yet. Trying to get middle schoolers to really care about that and be intrinsically motivated that way is outrageously weird. (*Cameron, interview, May 1, 2016*)

One participant emphatically stated:

I'm a teacher and I don't understand all of the repercussions! I mean, I'm a stakeholder and I don't understand the repercussions much less what a parent is going to know and tell their child. And then they make it so complicated that parents don't necessarily know

what it means so they may be explaining the completely wrong thing to their kid! So I don't think students understand what's at stake for them. *(Tyler, interview, May 2, 2016)*

Participants from one of the schools included in this study talked about "incentivizing" testing. They discussed that material rewards are not how they would commonly try to motivate students to do well but they have seen some positive results. One participant explained:

As much as I dislike the idea of material rewards for test taking, I do offer them and they have had an impact because most of my students are not intrinsically motivated where test taking comes in. I have motivated them with material rewards. So, yeah, I have taken a lot of time to explain things to them. *(Andy, interview, April 29, 2016)*

Some participants said that they believe students understand some of what they hear from their parents or community members but they do not understand the bigger picture of what is at stake. Participants did not feel that trying to explain these bigger picture repercussions to students would motivate students to do better or try harder on testing. The Center on Educational Policy (2012) suggests, "Relatedness can be affected by what students perceive is expected of them by society, how they will be judged by people of social importance, or what goals other members of their own social group or another desirable social group are pursuing" (p.3).

They understand that they are high pressured things. They aren't going to understand how we want to paint them. I don't think kids get it and all our rhetoric is just a complete waste. It is just blah, blah, blah. I don't know that they understand what is at stake for their school based on test scores. I don't think they understand that at all, I don't think that is going to be a motivator for them to do well. That is not going to get them to go home and study harder, "Oh gee, I can't let my school down." I don't ever sense that. *(Sam, interview, May 5, 2016)*

Higgins, Shah and Freidman (1997) explain Goal Attainment as “the perceived value of an event is the extent to which it fulfills the perceivers goals” (p. 515). Positive outcomes produce good feelings, while negative outcomes produce bad feelings. According to Pintrich (2000), “Achievement goal constructs represent an integrated and organized pattern of beliefs about, not just the general purposes or reasons for achievement, but also the standards or criteria (the ‘target’) that will be used to judge successful performance” (p. 93). Many participants expressed that students often ask them “why” they have to take the tests when the results do not impact their grades. In a report published by the Center on Education Policy, it was found that in order to feel competent, “students need to see their goals as realistic and achievable, which may require altering the goals or altering students’ perceptions of their own abilities” (p. 3).

I would say more often than not they don’t understand the goals. A lot of times I get asked “why do we have to take another test!?” especially when they see that it doesn’t impact their grades, they don’t understand that with all these new mandates, the teachers are graded and assessed and critiqued on how their students perform on these tests.

(Morgan, interview, May 3, 2016)

This participant also shared a story about a student in her class who wrote an essay on last year’s Smarter Balance test that reflects student understanding and frustration with the testing.

(Student name omitted) was very unhappy with the Smarter Balance test last year and he wrote a beautiful essay on how dumb the test was! In his words, and it was a very long 2-3 paragraphs, about how bad the test was. I saw it because he was a student in my classroom and I brought the principal in and he was made to re-write the essay, writing it to the prompt that was given rather than his own personal prompt. *(Morgan, interview, May 3, 2016)*

In the small schools included in this study, experiential, placed-based learning is a part of all participants' teaching and learning pedagogy. This type of "sterile" testing environment is, many times, unfamiliar to students who are accustomed to hands-on, student-centered learning.

One participant explained:

I don't think they have any idea why they have to take these tests. This type of work is so unlike anything we usually do in class and if they don't do well then there's the threat of having to do more work outside of class and this can be upsetting to some students. Some have trouble sitting still and being quiet for long periods of time and anticipation of this could throw some of them off. *(Sydney, interview, May 4, 2016)*

Test Prep for Understanding. Many participants discussed how they prepare and talk to their students about testing. Most said they explain to students that they either know the material or they don't and if they don't know the material then just work through the steps as best they can. Concern was also raised about the ten minutes of instructions that proceed each test. This is a detriment to students who have difficulty paying attention and increases the amount of time they are sitting for each test.

One participant explained this year's MEA to her students as:

They [students] are all getting the same kind of questions and they all know this is the first year so they know we are going to throw out the top questions and the bottom questions, the hardest and the easiest. So they know they are trailblazing to set the standards for kids all around the country and they think that is pretty cool. *(Jamie, interview, April 30, 2016)*

Some participants raised concerns that too much conversation about the testing has made some students more anxious about the testing. Most participants said they simply encourage

students to do their best because these tests are mandated. They explain that they have to take them so why do well on them. However:

There are a couple of students this year, who I think, because I have talked about how important the test is, have been more anxious taking the test, despite my efforts to reassure them that they know what they know and it doesn't matter if you don't know it. It is not going to come back and bite you, it may come back and bite us, but it is not going to come back and bite you so there is only so much you can worry about. (*Andy, interview, April 29, 2016*)

A concern about all the conversations with students about testing is the “mixed” messages students are receiving which may be causing confusion related to their importance. According to goal theory, goals should be attainable and should be understood by students. Tyler illustrated this concern by remarking:

I think we send such a mixed message as to whether it's important. “Well it is very important we want you to go to sleep on time, eat a good breakfast, we want you to be well rested, and don't worry about it by any means but it's very important, but don't worry about it!” And it's just such a mixed message. (*Tyler, interview, May 2, 2016*)

All participants expressed frustration over last year's Smarter Balance testing, which was dismissed by the state prior to completion of the testing. However, the state mandated that schools finish the testing even though the results had already been deemed invalid. The Smarter Balance test was referred to by many participants as being, “a ridiculous test altogether” (*Jamie, interview, April 30, 2016*). This test was described as having rules changed, such as some questions requiring more than one answer be selected, with all correct answers being selected in order to have the question counted as correct. A participant shared a concern a student brought to

her this year asking if they were taking the same test as last year. She reported that the student was relieved to find out it was a different test because she freaked out and just wrote all kinds of weird stuff on it. (Paraphrased) One participant laughed at the name of the test and said, “Smarter Balance is actually a brand of margarine” (*Cameron, interview, May 1, 2016*)!

This year, frustration resulted due to the MEA tests being inadequate and not ready for students to take.

I think this most recent round of MEA tests last year and this year, last year was a nightmare, so much testing, the kids were like...beaten down by the end of it. This year the state said it was going to be better but it really wasn't. I think by the end of the testing window they were feeling beaten down again by so much testing. (*Andy, interview, April 29, 2016*)

Another participant described this year's round of testing by saying:

I can speak to this year in particular, that there was a high frustration level that the tests weren't really ready to go. So the kids were feeling inadequate because the test was inadequate. And of course they feel that, as they rightly should feel, that when we give them something it should be ready to go and then they look at test questions and say that [the answers] don't have anything to do with the question. It is far more stressful for them when we don't have things prepared for them the way we need to have them prepared and we did not have these prepared the way they needed to be prepared. They were not fully impressed with it. (*Jamie, interview, April 30, 2016*)

One participant laughed about how he prepared students for this year's MEA test. During what his students call “Life Lessons with Mr. A.” (*Andy, interview, April 29, 2016*), he explained to them:

The neuroscience behind working memory is that working memory is like the RAM in your computer. Your computer goes and gets the program and operates it in the RAM and if you are running too many computer programs at once it all slows down and bogs up. Working memory is just like that. If you are worried about failing this test, your working memory is about half full and you can't process nearly as much information as you would otherwise. What I try to reinforce with them is that when you show up for a test, you either know it or you don't know it. And if you don't know it there is nothing you can do about it. So you come in and you accept that I know what I know and I am going to do the best I can and I am going to take my time and think my way through this. (*Andy, interview, April 29, 2016*)

Perceived Emotional Impacts on Students. All participants included in this study perceived at least moderate levels of anxiety for all students. Small class sizes, multi-year exposure to students, and close-knit community living allows teachers to know their students' needs and strengths. Teachers with small class sizes know the individual needs of each student and can recognize when their students are exhibiting signs of stress and anxiety.

Table 4.1. Perception of Emotion Impact of Testing on Students



Harris and Coy (2003) report physiological reactions of test anxiety to include increased heart rate, nausea, vomiting, frequent urination, increased perspiration, cold hands, dry mouth, and muscle spasms. “These reactions may be present before, during, and even after the test is completed. In conjunction with the physiological reactions, emotions such as worry, fear of failure, and panic may be present” (Harris & Coy, 2003, para. 4). Test anxiety is a major factor

contributing to a variety of negative outcomes, including psychological distress, academic underachievement, academic failure, and insecurity (Hembree, 1988).

I think they do get amped up a little bit when it comes to taking them. Like I said, once again, it just depends on the kids and at our school it's so small that we know the kids so well that we do know what kids will take it seriously and which ones will stress over it.

(Morgan, interview, May 3, 2016)

Another participant expanded on this idea by explaining:

I think that the behavior that I see in testing, particularly with these mandated tests, is the same behavior I see in the classroom. A student who is apathetic in the classroom will be apathetic during these mandated tests. A student who is anxious at test taking will be anxious during these mandated tests. There are a couple of students this year, [who] have been more anxious taking the test, despite my efforts to reassure them that they know what they know and it doesn't matter if you don't know it. It is not going to come back and bite you, it may come back and bite us, but it is not going to come back and bite you so there is only so much you can worry about. I think by the end of the testing window they were feeling beaten down again by so much testing. So I think that the student proclivities that are exhibited during these high stakes tests come with them to the test.

(Andy, interview, April 29, 2016)

High-stakes tests were described within the literature review as those that are used to make important decisions for students (such as placement, retention, graduation, and college admission), teachers (such as probation, bonuses, and employment) and schools (funding and student enrollment). Participants described their perceptions of the effects these tests have on students. Participants used words such as anxious, beaten down, frustrated, bored, discouraged,

restless, annoyed, overwhelmed, disengaged and so on, to describe what they see with students before, during, and after test sessions.

The [grade level] graders were just a mess during testing. They are challenging anyway but they were truly just terrifying that week. I would go to transition them to [class] and they were just like sniping at each other and snipping at me and refusing to participate. They were a mess; they were really a mess! (*Cameron, interview, May 1, 2016*)

One participant shared excerpts from student reflections about testing. She read directly from their reflection pieces sharing the first one which stated:

I hate the MEA testing. It makes me feel stupid. I never want to do MEA testing again.

Another wrote:

“It was hard. We should do more ELA and math and other classes. We could get more smarter if we did all that stuff.”

Another commented:

I do not like MEA testing because it made my brain hurt really bad and made me feel stupid because I didn't know anything.

The next one said:

It made me sick. I kept throwing up in my mouth and it tasted like McDonalds. I felt bad because everyone was done before me and they got to leave to get something to eat.

One reflected:

It was stressful. I just clicked through it because it was on the computer. It made me puke.

The next said:

Even though the test was easy, I don't want my whole life based off test scores. I really didn't like it, it was horrible. Instead of being judged by my test I want to be judged by my portfolio.

The final piece read:

The test stinks. It makes people feel dumb. I think I did a good job on it. Kids should not have to suffer through it. It is worse than dumping toxic waste on your head. The first test was not so bad, the second was worse and the third was bad. The fourth was horrible and the fifth was more horrible. (*Sydney, interview, May 4, 2016*)

Student voices included in this interview illustrated the negative effects high-stakes tests have on this group of students. The Center on Educational Policy (2012) states that in order to feel competent:

Students need to see their goals as realistic and achievable, which may require altering the goals or altering students' perceptions of their own abilities. To feel in control, students must be able to see a clear path to achieving the goal, through means they can control rather than through luck or chance (p. 6).

Marginalized and At-Risk Students. Several participants in this study spoke about the effects of high-stakes testing on students with special or diverse needs. Additional time and supports are often accommodations for these students. Miller (2006) identifies marginalized students as, "the teenage mother, the unmotivated genius, the poor test taker, the creative dyslexic, the family wage earner, the homeless student, and so forth in endless diversity" (p. 50). These students typically need additional educational supports and are at higher risk of drop out.

I saw a lot of kids with diverse learning needs and special learning needs almost in tears over this exam and having extended time where this thing took 6-7 hours to complete for

them. That was, to me, unethical and very cruel. Yes, so I did see a lot of that and you get your scores and find out the student didn't do that well anyway, because they are not good test takers to begin with. I saw a lot of anxiety there. (*River, interview, April 30, 2016*)

Participants felt that these students suffer the negative effects at a much higher level than students in the regular education population. Participants consistently ranked special needs students at an eight or nine for their level of anxiety.

I think the special education students are around an eight or a nine. I mean I have seen tens, where it is like you are peeling them off the ceiling. I think any of the special education students would be up around an eight or a nine. My SpEd kids really suffer, they really take a hit, big time, for it. It is not okay in any way. They just, they fold up. I have kids in [grade level removed] who are just learning how to read right now, and this really hurts them. It breaks my heart. (*Jamie, interview, April 30, 2016*)

Participants shared concerns over this population of students and the significant impact testing can have on them. Nichols and Berliner (2008) note that for students who struggle academically, high-stakes testing can diminish self-worth and academic motivation (p. 16).

Perceptions of Carry-Over Impacts of Testing on Students. Participants did not agree on how high-stakes test anxiety carries over into other testing situations. Some participants said that students like the low-stakes tests such as the NWEA, because it shows their growth over a year and teachers and students can celebrate that growth.

I like the kind of testing I want to do, like the NWEA. I like that one, my kids take that and I love it and because I love it and I use the information and I share it with my kids and I get them really involved with it, they too love it. They look forward to taking the

test and we get really excited and I don't even have to tell them what their scores are, they know from the beginning of the year to the end of the year and they will say, "I've grown thirty points." And they have made incredible growth and it is because they are engaged and enthusiastic about it. (*Jamie, interview, April 30, 2016*)

However, other participants expressed their concerns that anxiety levels have risen with taking low-stakes tests.

As far as anxiety goes, it just depends. If they know the results of their past performances, especially if it was below expectations and an adult such as a parent, a teacher, or a peer was judgmental about it, or you know, if it caused them to do more work or be pulled out from a class then yeah, they are more nervous when taking these tests too. (*Sydney, interview, May 4, 2016*)

Another participant reported this type of anxiety transfers to the classroom level with grade level, in-class assessments. She reported:

Still, every time I start grading it, they are like, "I can't look! I can't look!" They will say, "I knew I was going to fail!" I had to write fail on the board and cross it out and that is NOT for a high-stakes test, that is not even a Dibels or an Aimsweb that put them at grade level or below grade-level. (*Cameron, interview, May 1, 2016*)

Summary of Theme Four: Perceptions of Student Understanding and Emotional Impacts of High-Stakes Testing. Participants in this study overwhelmingly felt that students are not developmentally capable of understanding the goals and potential repercussions of high-stakes, standardized tests on them, their teachers, and their schools. Some participants said they believe some of what they are told by parents but some question the validity of parental understanding. One participant explained, "I'm a teacher and I don't understand all of the

repercussions! I mean, I'm a stakeholder and I don't understand the repercussions much less what a parent is going to know" (Tyler, interview, May 2, 2016).

All participants ranked their students as having at least moderate amounts of anxiety when taking high-stakes tests. Special education or diverse learning needs students were singled out as having significantly higher levels of anxiety. One participant passionately said that forcing these students into these testing environments was, "unethical and very cruel" (River, interview, April 30, 2016).

Many participants talked about how they prepare students for high-stakes testing but are concerned that the conversations about testing increase student stress and anxiety. There was not consensus among participants about whether or not they perceive the stresses and anxiety of high-stakes testing and cross over anxiety into the classroom environment or other test settings. Some participants shared stories of how they see this kind of cross-over effect with low-stakes tests. Other participants said they find a lot of value in low-stakes testing and share these results with students as a way of illustrating their growth throughout the year.

Conclusion

The nine participants included in this study all teach and live in small, rural, geographically isolated communities. All participants articulated their beliefs about teaching and learning and how the implementation of mandates affects their classrooms and their students. Participants discussed very similar approaches in their teaching philosophies. Every participant discussed the importance of relationships in understanding student strengths and challenges.

All participants talked about the impacts of mandate implementation on their teaching workload. Participants also discussed the significant role leadership plays in which mandates are implemented, how they are implemented, and the importance of each mandate. Participants

discussed specific mandates and how they are aligned with their teaching pedagogies.

Participants also discussed how these mandates impact their classroom curriculum, environment, and relationships. They also talked about how mandates align with their beliefs about teaching and learning.

Finally, participants talked about their perceptions of the emotional impacts of mandates, specifically high-and low-stakes testing on their students. All participants ranked their students as having at least a moderate level of anxiety when taking high-stakes tests. Participants discussed the effects these tests have before, during, and after testing. All participants expressed the significant impact testing has on special or diverse needs learners. Some teachers also expressed concern about carry-over anxiety with other testing environments.

This chapter presented the analysis of the individual and common experiences of teachers in small, public, geographically isolated schools. Meaningful statements gave descriptions of the four themes that emerged through the data analysis process. Together these themes form the foundation for a deeper consideration of the effects that mandates have on teachers and students in small, rural, isolated schools. Chapter 5 addressed the findings and implications of this study as they related to the phenomenon investigated in this research study.

CHAPTER 5

Discussion of Findings and Implications

This chapter begins with a brief overview of the study, followed by a synopsis of the design, limitations, discussion of major findings, and implications for future research. Linkages to literature are embedded within the findings and discussion section in order to place the findings within the literature that is relevant to the phenomenon being studied.

Overview of the Study

Throughout the past several decades, political influences at the federal and state levels have significantly changed the educational landscape. The design of governmental regulations creates an assumption that policy implementation is linear in nature and is unproblematic (Dorey, 2005), once received by the state and, once again, at the local level. However, research recognizes that a teacher's classroom practices are influenced by their beliefs and knowledge (Borko & Putnam, 1996). These beliefs and knowledge are a result of their experiences, both as student and teacher, and provide the lens through which they view their practices.

With increased pressure to equate student outcomes with raising test scores, researchers have begun to turn their attention to the role school leaders play in effectively implementing mandates, holding teachers accountable for student outcomes, and maintaining high expectations for students. Researchers recognize the pivotal role leadership plays in sharing the implementation process of reforms (Clifford, Behrstock-Sherratt, & Feters, 2012). One study conducted by Brezicha, Bergmark and Mitra (2015) found that one school's best efforts to implement reform were, "stymied by a failure to consider teachers' diverse personal philosophies, experiences, social networks, and supports" (p. 97).

Teachers have expressed concerns that the focus of high-stakes testing “keeps teachers from caring for students’ needs that are separate from how well they do on test scores” (Nichols et al, 2006, p. 3). Magee and Jones (2012) explore the influence epistemology or educational and world-view beliefs have on whether or not a person supports or opposes standardized testing. Testing proponents and policy makers claim test-based accountability programs hold educators responsible and, thus, raise student achievement (Evers & Walberg 2002, Raymond & Hanushek 2003). Jones and Egley (2007) found that, “Testing has a negative impact on some teachers’ abilities to use effective teaching methods, especially developmentally appropriate practices” (p. 238). Walton (2014) wrote, “According to experts, a poorly conceived set of standards has the potential to be, at best, fruitless and, at worst, detrimental to the youngest kids who are on the frontline of the Common Core” (para. 3).

Testing, particularly high-stakes tests, can be great sources of anxiety for students. Anxiety can cause poor performance on such tests, which increases the level of anxiety students feel. Thus far, research has shown limited to no correlation between testing pressure and increased test scores. Reay and William (1999) conducted a case study and found negative self-perceptions based on test results. They also found significant anxiety related to testing, even among high-achieving students.

This study addressed the following research questions in light of their usefulness in understanding how federal-and state-mandated high-stakes tests impact teachers and students in grades two through eight in small, isolated public schools:

1. What is your perception of the impact of federal and state mandates on your students, classroom, and beliefs as a teacher working in a small, isolated, public school community?

2. What has influenced your experiences and perceptions of the effects of federal and state mandates in your classroom and for your students?

3. From your perspective, do students show signs of anxiety before, during, and/or after standardized testing?

Synopsis of Design

Phenomenology examines the meaning, structure, and essence of the lived experiences of a group of people as they relate to a particular phenomenon (van Manen, 1990). This study inquired into the nature of the impacts of federal and state mandates on nine teachers who teach grades two through eight in small, public, geographically isolated schools.

Asking participants to discuss their beliefs about teaching and learning and how their environment affects those beliefs helped to create a profile of each participant. Participants were asked to describe how their small school implements mandates and to discuss how they perceive the effects of those mandates in their day-to-day teaching, which addressed the question of, “What is your perception of the impact of federal and state mandates on your students, classroom, and beliefs as a teacher working in a small, isolated, public school community?” Since there is a strong connection between how teachers view and implement mandates based on their beliefs, the interview questions helped to contextualize their perception of the impact of federal and state mandates on them and their students. When discussing their beliefs about teaching and learning, participants were asked to reflect on how the unique location where they live and teach affects their teaching and relationships with students, parents, and community members.

The second research question, “What has influenced your experiences and perceptions of the effects of federal and state mandates in your classroom and for your students?” was

addressed through a series of questions that asked participants to reflect on any impacts they perceived on their curriculum and relationships with students due to implementation of state and federal mandates. Participants were asked to answer questions related to how their school develops and implements mandates. Questions relating to the effectiveness of both in-house and off-site professional development were asked to discover how professional development is used to implement mandates.

The final research question, “From your perspective, do students show signs of anxiety before, during, and/or after standardized testing?” was asked to discover perceptions of the impacts of high-stakes, standardized testing on students. Questions related to what teachers observe before, during, and after testing periods were asked in order to paint a picture of their students. Questions surrounding student understanding of mandates and testing were also asked in order to complete the picture of potential perceived effects on students.

Limitations

Much like all other phenomenological studies, this study contains several limitations including methods utilized for the study, biases the researcher brings to the phenomenon under study, conducting research at the researcher’s own site, and the inexperience of the researcher. This section will describe these limitations, including ways in which I worked to mitigate limitations in order to strengthen the findings.

Phenomenology was selected for this study as it relies heavily on the perceptions of those who have experienced the phenomenon under study. Creswell (2013) describes a phenomenology study as “the common meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or a phenomenon” (p. 76). Due to the nature of phenomenology, findings are

bounded by what participants said about their perceptions. In order to provide context for information, participants were asked to tell stories that illustrated their perceptions.

Purposeful sampling was a useful strategy in selecting study participants. The pool of participants was small due to the unique locations of the schools under study. However, this phenomenological study was designed to gain the perceptions of teachers who work in small, public, geographically-isolated schools. The small number of participants and location of schools included in the study indicates limitations with the study being generalized to larger populations. Regardless, the study may serve as an example of small schools, both public and private, in less isolated communities.

Conducting research in your own organization has many challenges. I entered the study with concerns about prior relationships with participants, which could affect how they answered interview questions. In other words, knowing how I feel about standardized testing (as described in Chapter 3), I was concerned that colleagues might answer according to what they think I want to hear. Participants in my own organization were carefully selected and were asked if they felt any influence prior to participating in the study. Each participant from my own organization said they would be comfortable reporting their own perceptions. During the transcription process I became more confident that participants answered honestly and sincerely about their own perceptions. An unexpected benefit arose from interviewing participants in my own organization. After the interviews were conducted, I have found that the participants included in this study and I have had much deeper and richer conversations about our students, our organization, and philosophies.

The most significant limitation of the study was the biases I brought into the study. I am not a proponent of standardized testing and I have witnessed firsthand the effects these tests can

have on students. I am also a teacher who has to work to implement mandates, including administering standardized tests, developing teacher evaluation systems, and working towards a proficiency-based system. I have felt the pressure to change my teaching style and my curriculum in order to raise test scores. In order to put my bias aside, I developed questions to ask myself before I began each writing session or when I was unsure if my bias was clouding my interpretation of participants' perceptions. Journaling my own story was helpful in setting my bias aside. Journaling allowed me to write my own story so that it did not cloud those of my participants. Countless hours were spent reading and re-reading transcripts as well as listening to recorded interviews in full and in sections to ensure I was telling the stories of my participants as accurately as possible. Member checks were conducted in order to improve the credibility of the study and to strengthen the study's usefulness to other researchers.

Major Findings

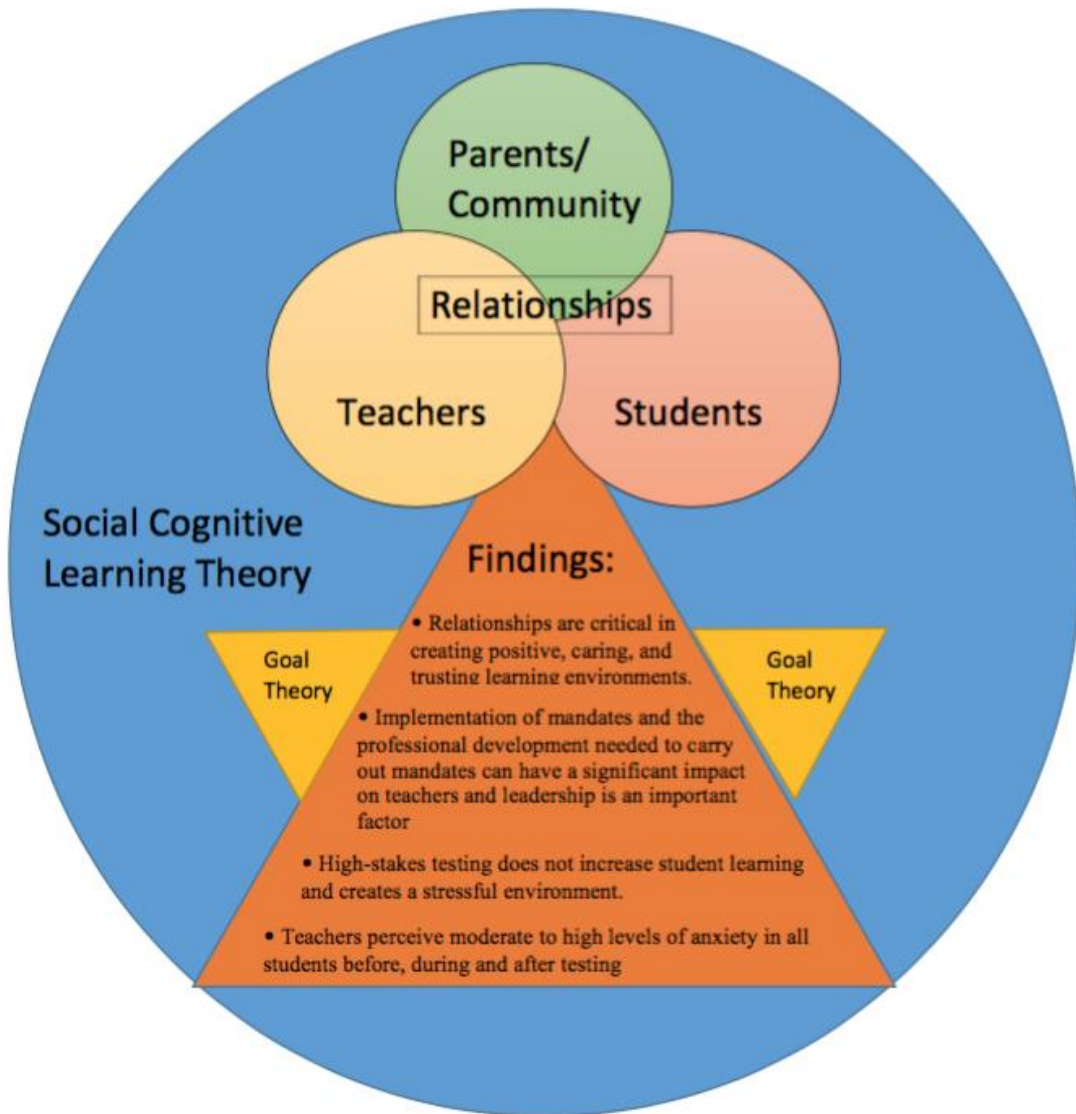
This study examined the perceptions of nine grade two through eight teachers who teach in small, rural, public, geographically isolated communities. All nine teachers are veteran teachers, having taught for five or more years. Seven of the participants have taught in other locations prior to their current teaching assignment. All study participants teach in multi-age classrooms and have twelve or fewer students per class.

Comparing and contrasting the perceptions of these nine teachers showed important distinctions as well as the following commonalities:

1. Relationships are critical in creating positive, caring, and trusting learning environments for all students. The unique locations of the schools included in this study help to support and develop relationships with students, parents, and community members.

2. Implementation of mandates and the professional development needed to carry out mandates can have a significant impact on teachers in small, geographically isolated schools. Impacts of mandates vary from school to school, however, leadership plays a significant role in what mandates are followed and can significantly impact collegial relationships.
3. High-stakes testing does not increase student learning and creates a stressful environment. However, most teachers find low-stakes testing useful in understanding student growth and needs.
4. Teachers perceive moderate to high levels of anxiety in all students before, during, and after testing. This can have a significant effect on the classroom environment and relationships between teachers and students.

Figure 5.1. Mind Map of Findings and Relationship of Themes



Finding One: Relationships are critical in creating positive, caring, trusting learning environments for all students. The unique locations of the schools included in this study help teachers develop and support relationships with students, parents, and community members.

Individual and cross-case analysis of participants' perceptions of relationships involve three groups: students, parents, and community. These groups are interrelated and integral to

understanding how the unique location of these schools fosters close relationships and builds support, trust, and understanding.

Students are the most important stakeholders in all school organizations. All teachers in this study discussed the importance of building trusting, caring relationships with their students.

Small class sizes and multi-year exposure to students encourages the development of these relationships. Cooper and Tom (1984) state, “Teachers’ beliefs about the improvement a student will make might also be expected to create self-fulfilling prophecies” (p. 78). Teachers in this study talked about the ability to set high expectations for their students based on each individual student’s needs. These strong relationships allow teachers in these schools to know when they can push students or when they need to care for basic needs. These needs may range from teaching a student how to brush his/her teeth, to knowing when they need breakfast, to knowing when they need encouragement. Living in such close proximity means that teachers see students everywhere in the community. Teachers often know what students are involved in after school hours, which enhances in-school relationships. Multi-age classrooms increase the ability to forge close relationships between students and teachers.

The drawback to this close community environment is that it can create some boundary issues between students and teachers. One participant described a situation in her classroom when students saw her out with a community member and asked her about her evening. Participants felt that the benefits of the close community outweigh the drawbacks of closer relationships with students because the result is increased student engagement and higher levels of achievement.

The unique location of these schools also enables teachers to build stronger relationships with parents and community members. Research shows a strong connection between parent and

community involvement and student achievement (Bryk, 2010 and Harris, Deschenes & Wallace, 2011). Community and parent involvement is a key element in the three schools included in this study. One study participant stated, “*We are the community. We are not part of the community, we are the community, we’re it. We are the whole town*” (Jamie, interview, April 30, 2016).

With only one teacher per grade level, it is easy to identify teachers when high-stakes test scores are released by the state. Students with diverse learning needs are not identified in testing data. With a class size of five students, each student represents 20% of test data. One student with special learning needs significantly affects statistical data. With this in mind, it may appear that a teacher is not effective, which can negatively affect their standing within the community. In small, isolated communities, this can have a profoundly negative effect on teacher-to-parent and teacher-to-student relationships.

Finding Two: Implementation of mandates and the professional development needed to carry out mandates can have a significant impact on teachers in small, geographically isolated schools. Impacts of mandates vary from school to school, however, leadership plays a significant role in which mandates are followed and can significantly impact collegial relationships.

Implementation of federal and state mandates relies heavily upon professional development in order to carry out the needs of the mandate. All participants talked about the role that leadership plays in whether or not, or which, mandates were implemented. All three schools have undergone significant changes within their administration over the past several years. This has caused upheaval with each school’s philosophy related to the importance of state and federal mandates. Sydney reported in her interview that former administrators at her school worked with

the state to help them understand the statistical irrelevance of her small school as it relates to test data. She said the system was not without flaws, but *“that may have been a better approach instead of the current approach where we are pretending to implement mandates”* (Sydney, interview, May 4, 2016). Meanwhile, River stated, *“I think mandates don’t affect our isolated island schools as much as they affect bigger schools, depending on who you have at the helm as superintendent”* (River, interview, April 30, 2016).

One of the three schools included in the study reported they do not pay attention to mandates. With very small staff sizes, implementation of mandates has a significant impact on each teacher’s workload. When mandates are out of alignment with a teacher’s beliefs about teaching and learning, studies have shown that teachers will alter initiatives or new practices so that the changes fit more closely with their own existing beliefs (Eisenhart, Cuthbert, Schrum, & Harding, 1988). Small schools may be more susceptible to this type of alteration of initiatives as all staff members are involved in the implementation process of mandates, which is compounded in K-12 schools. When the intent of a mandate is not agreed on by staff members, it becomes difficult to implement schoolwide.

Over the past several decades the number and intensity of mandates have increased. As a result, teachers look at mandates as a revolving door. Participants reported that one mandate is never completed and implemented before it is replaced by another. Part of the concern with this revolving door of mandates is the size and influence of state and federal agencies. Research has shown little to no correlation between mandates, such as high-stakes testing, and increased student achievement (Nicholas, et. al, 2006). With small class sizes and the ability to understand individual student needs, current mandates are out of alignment with teachers’ beliefs about teaching and learning. Teachers have little confidence in the effectiveness of mandates in

increasing student learning. Many teachers cited that the DOE website related to proficiency based learning has not been updated in close to two years. It appears that the DOE is unsure about how to implement this mandate, making it difficult for these small schools to come to a consensus on its implementation. This makes it difficult for teachers to understand the goals and intentions of mandates.

Teachers reported that they do agree with some of the components of recent mandates, such as having a set of standards to follow, which is part of a proficiency-based system. Teachers also found value in the RtI mandate. However, the implementation process of mandates becomes bogged down with understanding how to implement the mandates due to lack of agreement and human resources. Implementation of the proficiency-based system has been problematic at best in all three schools. There does not appear to be consensus among staff regarding scoring criteria and how it is developed across all grade levels and subject areas. This has left some teachers feeling very discouraged and inadequate due to a lack of understanding how to implement this mandate. This is especially true for those who find that the system does not match their teaching philosophy. Davis and Andrzejewski (2009) point out, “In the face of information that challenges their beliefs, such as policy inducement to reform, to modify/include new populations of students, or to innovate with new technologies, teachers tend to feel threatened (Fecho, 2001; Gregoire, 2003)” (para. 23). According to Pintrich (2000), “Target goals do specify the standards or criteria by which individuals can evaluate their performance, but they do not really address the reasons or purposes individuals may be seeking to attain these target goals for their achievement” (p. 5). Lack of understanding of the goals of specific mandates and lack of alignment with teachers’ beliefs about teaching and learning are at the heart of failed mandate implementation.

Professional development is critical to mandate implementation. In-house professional development in each of the three schools included in this study has been difficult. Participants reported that it is difficult in K-12 schools to find professional development that is applicable to all grade levels and subject areas. Effective in-house professional development is compounded when teachers do not trust or have confidence in the person providing the professional development. Follow up on the part of leadership to ensure all staff members are following through on implementing mandates has also been problematic and creates inequity in workloads.

Participants in this study all stated that off-site professional development has been the most helpful because it is purposefully chosen and better fits the needs of individual teachers. Participants also discussed challenges caused by travel limitations. There is also a limited number of substitute teachers available which makes it difficult to leave school in order to attend professional development workshops.

Teachers in this study indicated that mandates have had little effect on their curriculum or day-to-day functioning in their classrooms. Some participants have found having a set of rubrics to follow has helped with reporting student growth, or lack thereof, to parents. They feel that rubrics and standards provide more of a leg to stand on when reporting student progress because they leave little room for individual interpretation.

Finding Three: High-stakes testing does not increase student learning and creates a stressful environment. However, most teachers find low-stakes testing useful in understanding student growth and needs.

Teachers reported that tests like the MEA and Smarter Balance Tests are not accurate indicators of student achievement. Teachers also pointed out that the time gap between test administration and receiving scores renders the results useless for addressing student needs.

High-stakes tests also take a significant amount of time away from teaching and learning. These tests impact curriculum implementation and create anxiety for teachers and students. Merritt (2014) points out, “Numbers illuminate the fact that standardized tests do not improve student achievement and should not be used as resources to measure student ability” (para. 2).

Participants included in this study do not believe that standardized tests accurately reflect student learning or improve student learning. Magee and Jones (2012) explored the influence epistemology or educational and world-view beliefs have on whether or not a person supports or opposes standardized testing. The results of this study align with study participants as they tend to believe that knowledge is complex and oppose standardized testing. The reason being that they feel students are unique and cannot be rated based on one standardized test score. For teachers in this study, their ability to know and understand each student’s individual learning profile means they need to rely less on test scores to understand and report student achievement.

Teachers also addressed in-house, low-stakes testing as it pertains to student assessment. Most teachers indicated that they find tests, such as the NWEA, to be an effective tool for demonstrating student growth. These tests take approximately three hours, to complete as opposed to several hours a day over a two-week timeframe. Progress monitoring tests, such as Aimsweb and Dibels, had mixed results, based on how they are used. A participant who teaches RtI students reported that test anxiety has carried over into weekly tests and has created “*a lot of negative self-talk on the part of students*” (Cameron, interview, May 1, 2016). Another participant also reported that the progress monitoring tool being used for math does not align with their programming. Therefore, it creates stress and anxiety for students because there is material on the test that students have not seen before. She feels that this erodes the trust she has developed and nurtured with students. She reported that it also impacts the confidence parents

have in the program used to support her school's curriculum. There was also concern about how these progress monitoring tests are being reported to parents. Some teachers have been asked to change grades on progress reports in order to align with testing, rather than what teachers see in the classroom.

Some teachers have also been asked to re-organize curriculum to better align with testing goals. Hazi and Rucinski (2009) state, "What is most disturbing is the false confidence that accompanies numbers, as if they can replace professional judgments about teaching" (p. 14). There is also concern, supported in research, that one of the effects of high-stakes testing is, "perverse and corrupt educational practices" (Nichols, S., Glass, G., & Berliner, D. 2006, p.2). "Teaching to the test" is one form of such corruption. Research also reveals "that standards and state systems of accountability have created a situation wherein teachers teach to the test rather than challenge students to reach their potential" (Knoeppel et al., 2011, p. 7). Haladyna (2006) states that this is, "a type of consumer fraud" (p. 37). In small schools, teachers know their students and their needs and do not need to rely on high-stakes tests to assess their students.

Some participants in this study find low-stakes tests useful in assessing student growth. They feel it can help them illustrate to students that they have made progress. Low-stakes tests that are aligned with their curriculum can help inform teachers where individual students have gaps in their learning. Test scores can be accessed immediately and can therefore be used to adjust curriculum as needed.

Some teachers raised concerns about the intense focus on math and ELA in order to increase test scores. One teacher reflected about a conversation she had with a colleague in a larger school where the only focus in elementary classes is on math and ELA. This is a growing concern shared by Shepard (2002) who refers to this as *curriculum distortion*. Certain subject

areas are prioritized over others, with some, such as the arts, being cut altogether in order to spend more time on math and reading. This change in subject area emphasis results in teachers needing to spend a significant amount of time on core subject areas in order to show AYP in reading and math. In his interview, Sam discussed this as a concern because he does not teach a core subject. He also shared concerns about the impact this has on his ability to maintain strong relationships with students because the amount of time he teaches them in a week has decreased over the past few years.

Finding Four: Teachers perceive moderate to high levels of anxiety in all students before, during, and after testing. This can have a significant effect on the classroom environment and relationships between teachers and students.

Teachers reported at least moderate levels of test anxiety for all students while acknowledging that there are students on either end of the anxiety spectrum. One participant, Andy, articulated this by saying, “I think that student proclivities that are exhibited during these high-stakes tests come with them to the test” (Andy, interview, April 29, 2016). However, teachers see an increase in the intensity of those behaviors. Teachers reported that these behaviors carry over into other classes and aspects of their day.

Student reflections shared by Sydney, added students’ voice to how they perceive high-stakes testing. Students reported that they do not feel these tests reflect their learning and prefer to be judged based on their classroom work and portfolios. Students also reflected that the testing makes them feel “stupid” or “dumb” and causes them to feel tired and sick. Some students reported vomiting during or after testing and others reported symptoms of acid reflux. One student reflection on the recent MEA testing read, *“It is worse than dumping toxic waste on your*

head. The first test was not so bad, the second was worse, and the third was bad. The fourth was horrible and the fifth was more horrible” (As quoted by Sydney, interview, May 4, 2016).

Teacher perceptions of the effects on students’ emotional well-being included statements such as, “That was, to me, (long pause) unethical and very cruel” (*River, interview, April 30, 2016*). Jamie stated, “*I think my special education students really suffer. They really take a hit, big time, for it. It is NOT okay in any way. They just fold up” (Jamie, interview, April 30, 2016).* She said it is also very difficult for those students who are just learning to read, and “this really hurts them and it breaks my heart” (*Jamie, interview, April 30, 2016*). Cameron talked about students being “a mess” after testing and sees this carry through into other areas of testing. Andy described the level of anxiety he sees during testing being dependent upon when it is during a test that the first question trips up a student. He perceives that once a student comes across a question they don’t know, their anxiety rises and it becomes difficult for them to move beyond that. If the first question is problematic for a student then they will be anxious during the entire test, if it happens towards the end then they are generally okay until that point. Overall, students were described as being frustrated, bored, beaten-down, discouraged, fatigued, nervous, anxious, freaked out, antsy, panicked, defeated, and sick. None of the participants in this study found high-stakes testing beneficial for students, classrooms, or curriculum development.

None of the participants in this study felt that students understand the goals or reasons for participating in the MEA or Smarter Balanced testing. Some felt students have a basic understanding of taking low-stakes testing and can see and understand the results of those types of tests. Many participants discussed that the reasons and potential repercussions of high-stakes testing are developmentally out of reach for younger students.

Teachers were asked to share their perceptions of whether or not they feel that students are getting accustomed to taking high-stakes tests or if students are exhibiting more anxiety. Some participants perceived more anxiety while others talked about students becoming immune or complacent about testing. One participant, Avery, described students as being, *“almost like little connoisseurs of testing now. They say, “I like this one but I don’t like that one”* (Avery, interview, April 29, 2016).

Some participants also raised privacy concerns for students in their small schools. At times, there are class sizes of only two or three students. In the past, the state has distributed test data by grade level and gender. In some cases, this clearly identifies individual student test scores, which is a violation of FERPA.

Teachers shared other perceptions of impacts on their students as student frustration with the amount of testing and their readiness for the tests themselves, lack of momentum with their classes because they have to continually stop and test, and not covering enough in the curriculum to take the tests. In one of the student reflections read by Sydney, a student said they should be learning more before testing so, *“...we could get more smarter”* (As quoted by Sydney, interview, May 4, 2016).

Discussion

This study placed a spotlight on nine teachers who shared their perceptions of the impact of state and federal mandates on themselves, their classrooms, and their students. Through the inductive-deductive logic process (Creswell, 2013) used throughout this research study, four themes emerged: (1) teacher pedagogy, relationships, and location; (2) the process of implementation; (3) impacts of mandates on teachers, classrooms, and leadership; and (4) students’ perceptions of understanding and emotional impacts. All nine teachers share similar

beliefs about teaching and learning and the importance of building strong relationships in order to better understand individual student needs. All participants discussed the importance of these relationships within their small, geographically isolated communities. Many participants also talked about strong community and parental support that strengthens student learning.

All participants talked about in-house professional development as having limited productivity. Many participants also pointed out that it is difficult to provide K-12 teachers with professional development that is applicable to all grade levels and subject areas. Participants expressed concern that all in-house professional development is about implementing mandates. Participants find this prevents conversations about what is needed for day-to-day functions of their schools. Participants expressed that there are certain components of some of the mandates that they agree with and take back to their classrooms. This was highlighted with proficiency-based learning with most participants stating that they use standards in their classrooms. However, some said they do not understand or use analytic rubrics and doubt there will be community support of shifting grades away from letter grades.

All participants preferred off-site professional development versus in-house, as it can be thoughtfully tailored to individual teacher needs, grade level, or subject area. Participants whose schools are implementing mandates such as proficiency-based learning systems, find the process to be problematic at best. Reasons for this ranged from lack of confidence in administration to difficulty getting to a point of consensus about what is necessary to fulfill the requirements of the mandate. All participants displayed frustration with this process and most commented on the increased workloads due to the process of implementation of mandates. In larger schools this workload can be disseminated among many staff members. In these small schools, all staff members are involved in all areas of mandate implementation.

Most participants stated that they do not let federal or state mandates affect their classroom or their beliefs about teaching and learning. However, upon further dissection of participant interviews, it was revealed that many participants expressed concern that all in-house professional development is about implementing mandates. Participants find this prevents conversations about what is needed for day-to-day functions of their schools. Many reported changes in their curriculum due to the amount of time required for testing, shifting standards from the MLR to the Common Core or NGSS, or shifting program implementation to better align with testing timelines.

All participants perceived high-stakes testing as having a negative impact on their students and all ranked student anxiety levels at a moderate to high level for all students. Some students, such as special needs students were ranked as being much more anxious than other students. Students were described as being frustrated, bored, beaten-down, discouraged, fatigued, nervous, anxious, freaked out, antsy, panicked, defeated, and sick. All participants perceived that younger students lack the developmental capacity to understand the reasons they take high-stakes tests or the repercussions they can have on their teachers or their school.

Participants expressed frustration with the amount of time it takes to administer these tests and many discussed the overall lack of readiness on the part of the DOE in preparing these tests. Participants expressed that test scores are meaningless because of the amount of time between test administration and the release of test scores. This lag in time renders data useless when discussing student needs or curriculum re-alignment. Participants shared their perception of student frustration about the amount of time they are required to take tests, the disruption in the regular classroom schedule, and confusing test questions.

There was not consensus among participants as to the effective use of in-house low-stakes testing. Some participants found this type of testing useful in demonstrating student growth. Some also stated they prefer those types of testing because it is much less time consuming and test results are immediately available. Other participants raised concerns about the alignment of these tests with their classroom curriculum and raised questions about whether the tests being used were testing the most important subject areas. There was also some concern raised about the need to spend more time focusing on math and ELA in order to raise test scores. One participant discussed a trend he sees in his school that is reducing time spent in specialty classes. He feels this is having an impact on his curriculum and relationships with students. This was important to note as this has become a trend in larger schools. This is a trend that needs to be considered since this could be detrimental to the functioning of small schools, especially when considering teacher pedagogy and school philosophy.

A surprising sub-theme emerged during the coding process of participant interviews about the impact that leadership has on the implementation of mandates. Upon further investigation, it was found that all three schools included in this study have had significant changes in their leadership positions over the past several years. Many participants reflected on how mandates are viewed and their importance based on who is in the leadership role. The question was raised by many as to why mandates have become more important in these small schools than they were in previous years. Kotter (2012) states that, “Without an appropriate vision, a transformation effort can easily dissolve into a list of confusing, incompatible, and time consuming projects that go in the wrong direction or anywhere at all” (pg. 8). Concerns were also raised about the implementation process, ability to follow through with all staff on implementation of mandates, and overall trust.

Implications

The purpose of this study was to gain perspectives of teachers who teach in small, rural, public, geographically isolated schools. Within the limitations described in this chapter, the study offers implications for further research and practice.

Implications for Teachers. As this was a phenomenological study crafted around the perceptions of individuals who teach at uniquely located, small, public schools, it is important to understand the missing pieces and the questions that were produced. There are several ways to expand and enhance the findings of this study. It would be interesting to expand this study to other small, rural, isolated, K-12 public schools to discover if the values of this group of participants is shared in other similar locations.

Beliefs about teaching and learning were strongly engrained in study participants and were by-and-large agreed upon by all participants. The idea of building strong relationships was at the center of student achievement. It would also be interesting to research how teachers develop their beliefs about teaching and learning and whether teachers seek out specific locations to live and teach based on those beliefs, or whether their beliefs are influenced by the location where they live and teach.

Implications for Leaders. This study focused on the perceptions of teachers and therefore does not include the perceptions of school leaders. Leadership emerged as a theme within this study as it was discussed by all participants. One way to expand this study would be to gain the perspectives of administrators. Would administrators agree with the perceptions related to implementation of mandates? Would administrators share the perceptions about professional development and the challenges that face small, public schools? How do administrators view high-stakes testing? Would they agree with the emotional impacts that

teachers perceive? In-depth conversations between teachers and administrators may help to bridge the perceived gaps or differences in beliefs about teaching and learning and the importance of mandates.

Case-studies of new administrators in these unique schools would help to document their experiences in order to find ways to help them become more effective leaders in these unique schools. Closely examining leadership theories such as Transformational Leadership versus Transactional Leadership models in order to find the best fit for each organization could provide the structure to achieve the goals of mandate implementation.

Implications for Students. The literature review in Chapter 2 of this study found that there are gaps in research that includes student voices about how they perceive high-stakes testing, especially younger children. This study contains only teacher perceptions of their students as they relate to high- and low-stakes tests. Further research including their voices would help teachers, administrators, and policy makers understand the direct and indirect impacts of mandates, especially high-stakes standardize testing. The student reflections that were read by one participant were very informative. Students are the most important stakeholders in all school organizations and the inclusion of their voices in research may help provide missing pieces about the effectiveness and/or ineffectiveness of current mandates. This type of study would have to be carefully crafted since the research would revolve around young children.

Implications for Small Schools. This research study illustrates the advantages of small schools with small class sizes and high levels of parental and community support. These schools could offer much insight into the importance of maintaining and supporting small schools. Research into authentic student achievement assessment versus high-stakes, one-size-fits-all testing would be beneficial in improving student achievement. With the revolving door of state

and federal mandates, budget cuts, and consolidation, small schools are an endangered species, as are their teachers and students. Research that helps to support the continuation of these learning organizations is important to keep them viable.

Conclusion

Schools are, by nature, social places where all stakeholders are continually interacting with and learning from each other. The most effective organizations are those whose members learn from each other to build positive relationships through effective communication, understanding, and trust. They function best when all stakeholders are included in the goal-setting process, have clear goals with established outcomes, and have goals that are aligned with the organizations' collective beliefs about teaching and learning.

Teachers in small schools have the ability to know each students' individual learning styles, strengths, and challenges. Education can be tailored to meet the needs of each student and engage them in learning. Standardized tests are not necessary for teachers to assess or meet the needs of their students. The unique location of these schools enhances learning opportunities for all students. Class sizes are so small that the test results are statistically irrelevant, rendering them useless and unnecessary given the significant emotional impact they can have on students.

With limited staffing at the teaching and administrative levels, every voice matters. Therefore, leadership is critical in the understanding and implementation of mandates. It is vitally important that leaders work with staff to determine the importance and goals of mandates that will have the biggest and most positive impact on their school community.

Small schools should be in a position to provide unique learning opportunities that follow student interests that are supported by and embedded in the community. Teachers in these small, rural, geographically-isolated communities are in a position to mold federal and state mandates

to fit their beliefs about teaching and learning and to utilize only the components of those mandates that serve the best interest of their students. River summed up this idea by saying,

[I am] really spoiled with the freedom to kind of do more personalized learning with students and have so much more flexibility with what I could do with students in here than I could in any of my classes that I taught in [school]. It really makes me appreciate how innovate and how ahead of the curve small schools are, and our schools are, with the ability for teachers to really do their best. (River, interview, April 30, 2016)

Teachers who work in small, isolated, rural communities know their students well and are invested in educating the whole child. In these communities it is easy to build strong relationships. These relationships help teachers to understand the unique learning strengths and challenges of each student. Mandates have an impact on both teachers and students in these small schools, however, teachers work hard to minimize their impacts, especially those of standardized testing, and use only components that will strengthen student learning.

Omwana ni wa bhone (Regardless of a child's biological parents, its upbringing belongs to the community.)

~African Proverb

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Over the past several decades, educational initiatives at the state and federal levels have ushered in a plethora of mandates such as No Child Left Behind, Common Core, proficiency-based standards, teacher evaluation systems and Race to the Top (to name a few). These initiatives have had a profound impact on teachers and students throughout the country.

Teacher Perceptions

Explain how your small, isolated school implements mandates.

How have mandates affected your curriculum?

How have mandates affected or changed your teaching and/or your feelings about teaching?

Have mandates effected your classroom environment? If so, how?

Are there challenges and benefits to receiving professional development?

Tell a story that illustrates receiving professional development.

How do you stay informed and proactive with the goals of state and federal mandates?

How is that working for you?

How does that affect your teaching and beliefs about teaching and learning?

What are your beliefs about teaching and learning?

What do you believe is the best way to interact with students?

How do you think students learn best?

How are current mandates aligned with your beliefs about teaching and learning?

Tell me a story about how implementing or aligning mandates have impacted your ideals as a teacher.

Have your interactions with students changed at all due to the pressures and challenges of mandates?

Tell me about an interaction with a student that illustrates this.

The most important stakeholder with federal and state mandates is our student body, especially with the introduction of high-stakes, standardized testing at younger and younger ages. Of interest to this research is how testing may effect student self-esteem and anxiety.

Teacher Perceptions of the impact on their Students

Do you think your students understand the goals (reasons) they take standardized tests?

Do you think your students understand what is at stake for them, their teachers, and their school based on test scores?

What do you observe with student behaviors during testing periods?
Do you think students are becoming more comfortable with testing or are they exhibiting more anxious behaviors?

On a scale of 1-10 (1 being the least and 10 being the most) how anxious are students during testing?

On a scale of 1-10 (1 being the least and 10 being the most) do you see any changes since the implementation of the most recent mandates?

Do you think mandates have affected how you relate to your students and how they relate to you?

APPENDIX B: SITE PERMISSION SAMPLE LETTER

Printed on School Letter Head

University of New England Institutional Review Board
Institutional Review Board
11 Hills Beach Road
Biddeford, ME 04005

March 12, 1016

Dear University of New England IRB:

On behalf of the XXXX School, I am writing to grant permission for Christine Cooper, a graduate student at the University of New England, to conduct her research titled, “Teacher Perception of the Impact of Federal and state Mandates on Their Students and Classrooms in Small, Rural, Isolated Communities”. I understand that Ms. Cooper will recruit up to five of our staff members and conduct interviews at the XXXX School over the next six months. We are happy to participate in this study and contribute to this important research.

Sincerely,

Administrator
XXXXX School

APPENDIX C: AN INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN A DOCTORAL RESEARCH STUDY

Subject: Participation in a Doctoral Research Study

Greetings,

You are invited to participate in a research study of the perceptions of teachers of the impacts of federal and state mandates, including standardized testing, on teachers and students who teach in small, public, isolated community schools. You were selected to receive an invitation to participate in this study because your school: 1) is located in a geographically isolated community, 2) is a small, public school 3) and you teach grades 2-8. I am conducting this study as part of the doctoral program in Educational Leadership at the University of New England.

This study will involve approximately ten teachers from three school districts. The participants will include multiple subject teachers in grades two through eight who teach in small, geographically-isolated, public schools. These grade levels have been selected because of the increase in standardized testing at this level as well as an increased number of state and federal mandates that impact those who teach at this level.

To identify the range of experiences, characteristics, and perceptions of the participants, I am inviting you to participate in an interview. Interviews may be conducted in person, via internet, or over the phone and will take approximately 45 minutes. Participation is absolutely voluntary and all identifying personal information will be removed from interview transcripts including name, name and location of school, number of teaching years, etc, in order to keep all participation anonymous.

For your review, I have attached a copy of the approval from your school office and the Participant Informed Consent form. Please contact me at ccooper5@une.edu or at home at 867-4406 if you are willing to participate in this research study or if you have any questions.

Thank you for taking time to consider this invitation to participate in this research study.

Christine L. Cooper

APPENDIX D: PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM

TEACHER PERCEPTIONS OF THE IMPACT OF FEDERAL AND STATE MANDATES ON THEIR STUDENTS AND CLASSROOMS IN SMALL, RURAL, ISOLATED COMMUNITIES

Christine L. Cooper, Doctoral Candidate
University of New England
Department of Education

You are invited to participate in a research study of the perceptions of teachers of the impacts of federal and state mandates, including standardized testing, on teachers and students who teach in small, public, isolated community schools. You were selected to receive an invitation to participate in this study because your school: 1) is located in a geographically isolated community, 2) is a small, public school 3) and you teach grades 2 -8.

This study is being conducted by: Christine L. Cooper, Doctoral Candidate, University of New England.

Background Information:

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to gain perspectives of teachers on the impact of federal and state mandates, including the results of high-stakes standardized testing. The study focused on second through eighth grade teachers and their students in multiple small, geographically isolated, public schools during the 2015-2016 school year.

Procedures:

If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to participate over an eight-week period in one scheduled interview, with follow up questions/interview as necessary. Interviews can be expected to last approximately forty-five minutes depending on follow-up questions or clarification resulting from the participant responses. Open-ended interview questions will be provided prior to the scheduled interview. Additionally, with your permission, each interview will be audio taped for the purpose of post-interview transcription. You will have the opportunity to review the transcript as well as the findings to ensure accuracy. The result of this study will be made available upon request.

Risks and Benefits of Participation in the Study:

Risks. There are no known risk associated with this study.

Benefits. By participating in this study you will add to the body of knowledge concerning the impacts of state and federal mandates on teachers and students in small, public schools including challenges and benefits of professional development and interpersonal relationships. By examining the impact of mandates on small schools, teachers and students, through their teachers, may be given a voice in the process of implementation of such mandates.

Confidentiality:

All records regarding this study will be kept confidential and securely stored in the researcher's home office for three years. Only the researcher and the three members of the dissertation committee from the University of New England will have access to these records. Identifiable information such as participant names, school site and location will not be included in any sort of published report. Instead, pseudonyms will be used throughout the study in an effort to protect your privacy and that of your students.

Voluntary Nature of the Study:

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision to participate or decline to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the University of New England. If you decide to participate, you are free to decline to respond to any questions or prompts and you may withdraw from the study at any time without affecting this relationship.

Contacts and Questions:

The researcher conducting this study is: Christine L. Cooper, under the supervision of Carol Burbank, Ph.D. of the University of New England (cburbank@une.edu).

If you have any questions you are encouraged to contact me at (207) 867-4406 or by email at ccooper5@une.edu. If you have any other questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, you are encouraged to contact: Carol Burbank, Ph.D. of the University of New England (cburbank@une.edu). You will be provided with a copy of this information to keep for your records.

Statement of Consent:

I understand the above description of this research and the risks and benefits associated with my participation as a research subject. I agree to take part in the research and do so voluntarily.

Please check the appropriate box:

I consent to have an individual interview and to have it audio recorded

I do not consent to an individual interview

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Printed Name of Participant: _____

Researcher's Statement

The participant named above had sufficient time to consider the information, had an opportunity to ask questions, and voluntarily agreed to be in this study.

Researcher's signature

Date

Printed name